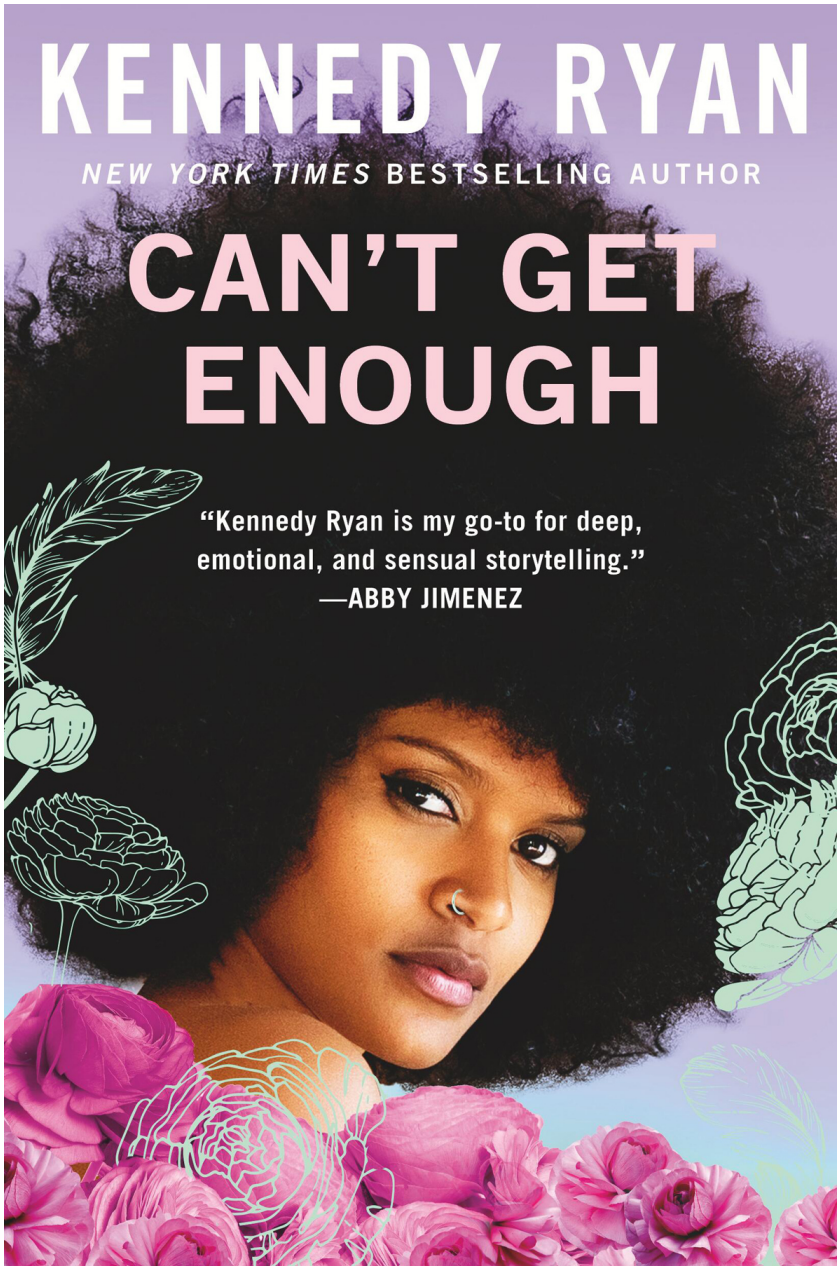
KENNEDY RYAN
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CAN'T GET ENOUGH
"Kennedy Ryan is my go-to for deep, emotional, and sensual storytelling."
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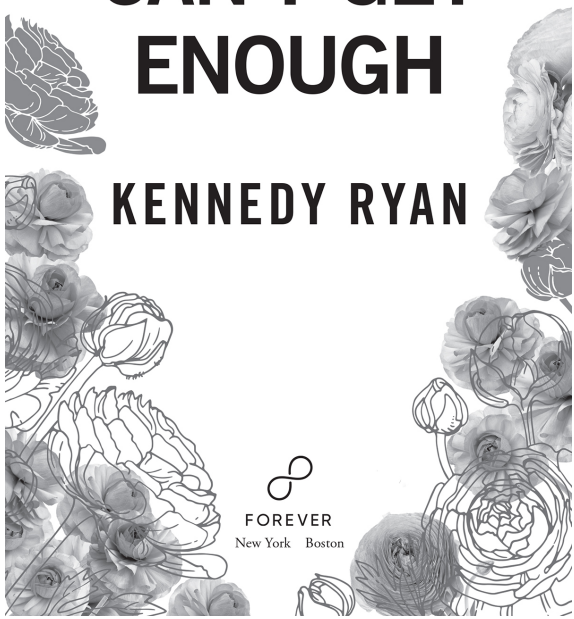
CAN'T GET ENOUGH



KENNEDY RYAN

FOREVER
New York Boston

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For the ones who have used your magic to lift, protect, and illuminate everybody else… rest is our new resistance.
Rest & shine, my loves.
Rest & shine.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

It often feels like the stories I tell find ways to intersect with my real life. I'm one of those "precious" writers who actually believes a little bit of the divine finds its way into the creative process. So I've stopped being surprised when there are signs along the way that I'm on the right path or that I'm writing exactly what I should be. I believe that when I follow those whispers, people who need my work and my words will find them at the right time.

If you've read the first two books of the Skyland series, *Before I Let Go* and *This Could Be Us*, you've already met Hendrix, the heroine of this book. I've mentioned previously that she was caring for an aging parent living with some form of dementia. In *Can't Get Enough,* we learn that it's Alzheimer's. Research and interviews are always the cornerstones of my creative process. It's where I begin. So I interviewed several people who are caregivers for loved ones with dementia and also health care professionals who work in this area. One of the people I interviewed was my mother because her mother, my "Banny," had been living with dementia for several years and her condition had continued to deteriorate.

The week after I turned in my edits for this book, Banny passed away. It was not an easy journey. She wasn't consistently recognizing people around her at the end, but she would ask for her sisters, for her brothers, for her mother—all who had gone ahead of her. I like to think that in the haze of her final days, they were light and lifeline to her, and she was reaching for them. She was longing for a peace that I firmly believe she has now found.

I tell you this so that you know Hendrix's journey is not theoretical for me. I'm not removed from the emotions and the difficult task of caring for a loved one in various stages of dementia. I've also seen the flashes of joy this experience can bring when we least expect it. How the human mind, which can betray us, can also delight and astound when we've underestimated its capacities.

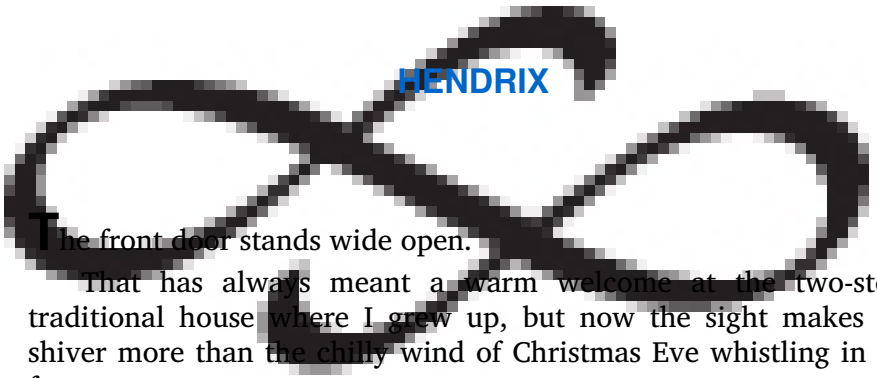
No two journeys are identical. Some aspects of Hendrix's mother's situation may feel familiar to those negotiating these circumstances, and some may be quite different. Special thanks to Jess, Tiye, Erin, Jazmine, Eric, Teresa, Lexi, Lucy, and my mama for sharing their experiences as caregivers and loved ones. I also want to extend grace to the caregivers who manage the challenge of living their lives, taking care of their families, and working, while also finding themselves parenting their parents later in life. It is tough in so many ways, but based on the conversations I had, also a responsibility most see as a privilege. If you're walking this road in any role or capacity, my great wish is that even as parts of this story may hit close to home, that they hit with hope. That this story resonates and that you feel the care and thought with which I tried my best to handle this topic. I'm sending you strength and hope and all the best.

Thank you for reading. ♡

“A woman is free if she lives by her own standards and creates her own destiny.”

—Mary McLeod Bethune, educator, philanthropist, activist

PROLOGUE



HENDRIX

The front door stands wide open.

That has always meant a warm welcome at the two-story traditional house where I grew up, but now the sight makes me shiver more than the chilly wind of Christmas Eve whistling in my face.

"Is this it?" the Uber driver asks, watching me stand in the driveway with my rolling suitcase.

"Uh, yeah." Uncertainty colors my voice and probably my expression if the driver's *Can I go now?* face is anything to judge by. "This is it. Thanks."

But *is* this home? The slightly overgrown lawn and uneven hedges would never have been tolerated by my mother in all the forty years of my life. The garage door is up and Mama's pride and joy, Shortcake, her pearl-colored Lincoln MKC, is parked there. Mama wouldn't leave her baby exposed like that.

Something's wrong.

Something's been wrong for a while. I haven't exactly ignored it. I'm not one to bury my head in the sand, but I did hope it wasn't as bad as I'd suspected. There are worse things to be guilty of than hope, but right now I can't think of them.

As the Uber pulls off and I drag my bag up the driveway to the wide-open front door, the cloud of dread that has gathered in my belly for the last year calcifies and drops like a stone. I cross the threshold and shut the door behind me, surveying the front room Mama always kept immaculate. It was the first impression of our home, and I've never seen it in such disarray. Black dirt from an

overturned plant soils the white carpet. A thin layer of dust dulls the end table's usually shiny surface, and the lampshade is askew. The whole scene is askew, and I'm so disoriented it feels like I'm standing on the ceiling.

"Mama?"

Her name comes out thin and tentative, like when I called her as a child, scared there was a monster hiding under my bed. She always responded right away, coming into my room with a reassuring smile.

There is nothing reassuring about this answering silence.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The smoke detector blares, breaking the quiet and jarring me from my stupor. White clouds billow into the hall, and I race to the kitchen. Plumes of smoke stream from a hissing pan on the stove. The acrid scent of something burning floods the air and stings my nose.

Shit!

Coughing, I rush past a mound of flour in the center of the kitchen floor, fumbling through the drawers where Mama always keeps dish towels. Wrapping one around the handle, I drag the pan away from the angry red burner. The pan sizzles when it hits the sink, a curtain of steam rising into the air and almost blurring—but not quite—the sight of raw chicken parts, chopped vegetables, half-formed piecrusts, and sloppily sliced fruit littering the counter.

What the…

Lifting the pan lid reveals collard greens, or what's left of them. All the water boiled out and the charred mass is stuck to the bottom. I wrench open the oven door, and my nose wrinkles at the scorched, withered mess that may have been a ten-pound turkey in its previous life. Grabbing a second dish towel, I pull the smoking mess from the oven and plop it onto the range.

The smoke detector keeps squawking, so I stretch to vigorously wave my hands back and forth in front of the blinking alarm until it quiets. The silence that follows is even worse. With the immediate emergency of burning food addressed, I'm forced to deal with the bigger problem.

Where's Mama?

"Ms. Catherine," I say with sudden realization.

How many times has Mama walked over to our next-door neighbor's house while her food simmered and baked? That has to

be where she is. I sprint out the back door to the fence that divides our yards, pushing impatiently at the wobbly gate that is never locked between the two houses. I charge up the cobblestone path Mama's closest friend laid through her garden, absently noting the frost-covered bushes sure to bloom in spring. I bang on the door.

"Ms. C," I call, tugging on the metal handle. The door doesn't budge. I go around front and ring the doorbell, but no one answers. Face pressed to the window, I'm disturbed by the quality of the darkened room I peer into. The stillness is stale like nothing has stirred in a long time inside.

"Hendrix? That you?"

I turn on the porch and frown at Mrs. Mayer, the neighbor from across the street Mama and Ms. Catherine never could tolerate.

"*Gossipy, is what she is*," Mama used to say. *"Couldn't keep a secret if it was sewed in her jaws."*

"Mrs. Mayer." I walk down the steps to meet her at the fence she's peering over. "Have you seen Mama or Ms. Catherine?"

The papier-mâché of her finely wrinkled skin creases with a series of emotions—surprise, dismay, sadness.

"I saw your mother earlier when I was out walking." *Meaning snooping.* "But I haven't seen her in a few hours. And Catherine, well…"

Her eyes drop to the grass and then lift, surprising me with their wetness.

"Well, Catherine passed. We buried her two weeks ago. You didn't know?"

My head spins and my fingers shake as I grip the fence for support.

"What do you mean…" I grapple for words, but can't form a coherent thought. It's not possible my mother's best friend died two weeks ago and I didn't know. "She… died? How?"

"Heart attack." Mrs. Mayer shakes her head, letting her gaze drift over to Ms. Catherine's front porch. "Your mama didn't take it well, as I'm sure you can imagine."

I've been out of the country for work, but Mama and I spoke several times over the last few weeks, and most of those times she seemed lucid and pretty close to her usual self. In none of those conversations did Ms. Catherine's death come up. We talked yesterday to confirm my flight time. I make sure to come home at least once a month, twice if I can, but work has slammed me hard

recently. I called Ms. Catherine a couple of times last week and got voice mail, but that has happened before. She always calls back.

Not this time.

"I can't believe Betty didn't tell you," Mrs. Mayer says, her look shifting from mournful to speculative. "I wondered why you weren't at the funeral."

"I… yeah, I…" There's no answer for it. I refuse to give this woman more information that's none of her business.

"So is Betty missing?" Her gaze sharpens, snaps to our back door, which, in my haste, I left open. A few tendrils of smoke straggle from the kitchen into the early evening air.

"No, not missing. Not home. I just got in from Atlanta and wondered if you'd seen her. I'm sure she's out running some last-minute errands or something."

"But her car's in the garage," Mrs. Mayer states. "She wouldn't walk to the grocery store."

"I need to go, Mrs. Mayer." I turn abruptly and don't wait for her to acknowledge the dismissal. "Merry Christmas."

"Let me know when you find her," she calls.

My steps stutter at the word "find," but I speed-walk back into our house.

Mama's missing.

When we first got the Alzheimer's diagnosis, of course the doctors told us wandering was a possibility, but it's not something we've had to deal with much before. Not like this. I need to call the police. I have no idea how long she's been gone, where she might be. I knew the situation here wasn't sustainable. It was patched and Band-Aided until we could figure out a long-term solution, and Ms. Catherine was the glue barely holding it all together. But she's gone now, and Mama's missing. An icy rivulet of fear runs down my spine, and I'm paralyzed. I—who always know what to do, where to go, what the next step should be—stand frozen in place with a sinking sense of dread and awful knowing. My throat closes around a sob, choking it into a whimper. I blink at the tears gathering in my eyes and swipe them.

"Get your shit together." I pull the phone from my pocket, poised to dial the police department, but it rings before I can initiate the call.

"Hello?" I say it like a question because everything is right now. I know nothing except the terror rolling through my body like a

giant snowball hurtling toward a cliff's edge.

"Ms. Barry?" It's an even voice—starched, calm. "Hendrix Barry?"

"Yeah… um, yes. I'm Hendrix Barry."

"I'm Officer Billings. We have your mother here."

His words loosen the fist in my chest. My heart is a raging rhythm in my rib cage. The blood rushes to my head and I draw a shaky breath. I shuffle through the heap of flour to slump against the counter in relief, heedless of the white powder dusting the black boots I thought I couldn't live without last week.

"Is she hurt?" My voice cracks under the strain.

"She's fine," Officer Billings replies, his tone professional, but not unkind. "A little… confused, but doesn't seem to be worse for wear. Your information was in her purse and written on her hand."

"Where is she?" I grab Mama's car keys from the hook on the wall by the fridge, already on my way to the garage. "At the police station?"

"No. We're at an old plaza off Plymouth Ave."

"The one where the Dollar General used to be?" I frown, starting the car and peeling out of the driveway like I'm being chased by goblins.

"Yeah, that's the one. Security guard saw her wandering around the parking lot. The address—"

"I know where it is." I change lanes, barely checking for oncoming traffic. "I'm only about five minutes away. Can you—"

"We'll be here until you arrive."

"Thank you."

I barrel through a yellow light, glad that most people on this side of town seem to be off the streets this late on Christmas Eve. Tears track a hot streak over my cool cheeks.

"Stop," I snap, swiping impatiently at the wetness. "Mama will be upset enough without seeing you all broke down."

But *broke down* is exactly how I feel, like every wall, every *thing* that has been holding me up, holding my fears back, collapsed when I saw the chaos at the house.

I pull into the parking lot and it's like stepping back in time, except years ago this plaza was the thriving center of our community. I'd be here with Mama all day on Saturdays, roaming from Cato to Lee's BBQ to the small bookstore at the end of the row whenever I wasn't helping in her bakery, Sweet Tooth. The pastel

cupcake sign that used to grace Mama's shop is long gone. A hardware store took over when she had to shut down, but even that store has left the plaza. The sign hanging up now says *FOR LEASE*. A haze of disuse shrouds the lonely plaza. Even the few vehicles in the parking lot seem not so much parked as put out to pasture.

I spot the squad car right away and pull up beside it. Not even bothering to turn off Mama's car, I slam into park and jump out, leaving the driver's door open. The police officer leans against the car, but I glimpse Mama in the back seat and my heart clenches. Once when I was sixteen, the cops picked up some of my friends and me for "cruising." Whatever we were doing was harmless, but we were a bunch of Black kids hanging out late, so we must have been up to no good. They made me sit in the police car until Mama came, and I quaked in fear waiting for her to arrive. All my adolescent bravado fell away and I remember feeling so young and so small in that big back seat. It's Mama in the back of the cop car now, but I still feel small and completely unprepared for what's ahead.

It's funny how the tables turn.

I'm only now realizing that often when people say "it's funny," they really mean that it's… sad. A sad reversal of fortune. To have always been the parent. And now to be…

Mama doesn't look up, but I sense that she knows I'm here. I reach for the door handle, but the officer stays my hand.

"Can we talk for a minute before you…" He tips his head toward the car.

I lick my lips nervously at the ominous weight of his words. "Of course."

"This was in her purse." He extends a slip of paper to me.

If lost, call my daughter Hendrix Barry.

My cell number is scribbled at the bottom.

If lost, as if she's a misplaced item. Something that could be easily returned, only I don't think anything can bring my mother back. Not ever really again.

"That's how we found you so fast," the officer continues. "I checked the records, though, and we've, uh… had a few calls about her before. She seems a little more disoriented this time. In the past, we called a Catherine Simmons."

"Yeah, she… um, Mrs. Simmons very recently passed away. I didn't find out until tonight."

“What’s your mother’s condition?” he asks, eyes trained on my face.

“Alzheimer’s.” The word still feels unfamiliar, the hard consonants of it scraping against my teeth and tongue. “She was diagnosed last year. Early stage and it’s been manageable. I live in Atlanta, but she didn’t want to move there. She wanted… she wants to stay here, to stay home. And we agreed only because she had Catherine.”

“Can I be frank?” Officer Billings asks, barely waiting for my nod before going on. “In cases like this, social services will step in and tell the family that if you don’t make some kind of arrangements, you’ll be held responsible if anything happens to her or to someone else.”

“Arrangements as in—”

“She can’t live alone anymore, Ms. Barry. What that looks like, you and your family will have to determine, but this can’t continue. Not just because it’s disruptive for us, but for her own safety.”

It’s nothing I didn’t know, but it’s a tidal wave, and the only thing standing between me and the inevitable crash was Ms. Catherine. Now she’s gone.

“This won’t happen again.” I flick a glance over his shoulder to my mother’s silhouette in the back seat. “We’ll figure it out. Thank you for calling and for taking care of her.”

He offers a brief nod and opens the door.

“Mama,” I say, smoothing the distress of the last hour from my tone. “Let’s go home.”

The eyes my mother lifts are familiar, because they are the same deep shade of sable brown I meet in the mirror every morning, but they are foreign in their vacant bewilderedness.

“Huh?” Mama says… asks.

“Let’s go home,” I repeat, taking her elbow gently, helping her out of the car.

I swallow a gasp at my first clear sight of her under the parking lot lights. Her hair is matted in places. Dark circles smudge under her eyes. She shivers, pulling a housecoat over the lounge pants I’ve never seen her wear beyond the privacy of our home. Her tennis shoes are mismatched.

And she smells.

That is maybe the most heartbreaking detail of this scenario. My mother, who has always showered morning and night, smells

like she hasn't showered in days.

"Come on, Mama," I say, taking her elbow and guiding her to the passenger seat. I go to fasten her seat belt, but she knocks my hand away.

"Hendrix Rae," she snaps, her voice low and indignant, defiant. "I'm not a child."

I much prefer her irritation, even her anger over the lost look in her eyes moments ago.

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry." I climb behind the wheel and start the car, but don't leave even once the officer does. I need to know. "Why'd you come here, Mama?"

She stares at the hands in her lap, blinking rapidly. "I… I got confused. I thought…"

Her lips clamp on whatever she was about to admit, and strain tightens the skin around her eyes.

"Your store, the bakery, used to be here." I cast the statement like a hook, fishing for the answers that will make sense of this. "Can you please tell me why you came here, Mama?"

She squeezes her eyes shut and dips her head, shame in her trembling mouth and the tears like crystals on her bottom lashes. The silky belt of the robe is twisted into her clenched fist.

She can't bring herself to admit it, but I know my mother came here tonight to open up her bakery, the one that's been closed for more than a decade. It's getting worse, and even being as involved as I have been and talking to her as regularly as I do, I didn't know.

How could I not know?

* * *

After pulling Shortcake into the garage, I get out and head for the door to the house, but Mama stays in the front seat, her eyes trained ahead.

"Mama," I say, stopping beside the passenger door and opening it. "You coming in?"

"No." She wraps her arms around herself and shakes her head vigorously. "No, no, no. They'll come back."

"Mama, no one is there. No one is coming back."

"They come at night sometimes." Eyes wide and wild, she lowers her voice, casting a furtive glance at the front door. "They

took my underwear, Rae. They go through my cabinets and refrigerator. They steal from me. I get scared."

"No one's gonna hurt you, Mama." I swallow past the hot lump swelling in my throat. "I won't let anyone hurt you ever. Okay?"

"You're not here." Her bottom lip quivers and she squeezes her eyes shut. "No one is here anymore. They're all gone."

Her mother. Her best friend. Her husband. All gone. One of the hardest parts of aging is being the one "still standing" when everyone else has found their peace lying down. And Mama has seen so many go.

Guilt washes through me, cresting in frustration and shame. I *wasn't* here. I live hundreds of miles away.

"I'm here now," I say, leaning against the open car door. "Come inside with me so we can eat Christmas dinner."

What's left of it.

She peers past me to the door, apprehension painting lines around her mouth and eyes. "You sure the coast is clear?"

"I'm sure." I extend my hand to help her climb out of the SUV.

When we enter the kitchen, I stop short, shocked to see the flour swept up, the counters clear, a window open letting in cool fresh air to dispel the smoke. For a moment, I wonder if Mama's delusion has some merit, when the kitchen door swings open.

"Aunt Geneva!" I press a hand to my racing heart. "I forgot you were coming."

"That's obvious," grumbles my aunt, a retired elementary school teacher, walking over to the pantry and putting away the broom. "House wasn't even locked up. Betty, you forget I was coming?"

Aunt Geneva, my mother's older sister, wasn't around very much when I was growing up. In their forties, they had a falling-out over land my great-aunt left them, one of those silly family spats that blows up and takes years to sort through. It's only over the last ten or so years they've started truly repairing their relationship.

"I didn't forget," Mama says, her face held stiff. "How could I forget you were coming in from Virginia?"

Aunt Geneva's sharp glance assesses Mama's unkempt appearance, and then flicks to me. Our eyes hold, and the knowledge that Mama definitely forgot passes between us.

"Sissy," Mama whispers, her voice shaking and a solitary tear streaking down her face. "I didn't forget. I wouldn't forget. How

could I…"

Aunt Geneva crosses the kitchen in a few strides, pulling Mama close to her chest like the little sister she is in that moment, stroking her back and patting her hair.

"Of course you didn't forget, Bet," Aunt Geneva whispers. "And it don't matter either way."

She meets my eyes over Mama's head and says, as much to me as to her, "'Cause I'm here now."

Mama's Christmas meal is obviously unsalvageable. While Aunt Geneva cooks breakfast for dinner—eggs, pancakes, grits, toast, hash browns, sausage, and bacon—I get Mama settled. First order of business is a shower. Then I do a quick wash and blow-dry for her hair, oiling her scalp and using the rollers she prefers. She's been pretty quiet since we got home, as if she's withdrawn into a safe place in her head; a quiet spot where no one expects her to remember or respond. Even still, I keep up a steady flow of one-sided conversation, every once in a while humming her favorite, "This Christmas." Loves herself some Donny Hathaway.

"Y'all come on and eat," Aunt Geneva calls up as I'm sliding the last roller into Mama's hair. "'Fore this gets cold."

At the table, we all punish our food—stabbing, jabbing, and pushing it around our plates in the stilted silence of the dining room. So different from the holidays of years past, where the laughter and Christmas music made it so you couldn't hear yourself think, but that was fine because all you needed to do was laugh and eat. Mama picks at her eggs for a while and then, claiming fatigue, rises and slips off to her room. I'd usually try to coax her to stay, but I can practically see words burning a hole in the tip of Aunt Geneva's tongue.

"We need to talk," she says as soon as Mama's footsteps on the stairs fade and her bedroom door snicks closed behind her.

"I know." I raise a strip of bacon to my lips for a disinterested bite. "I didn't find out about Ms. Catherine until today, that she had passed."

"Me neither." Aunt Geneva whooshes out a breath and shakes her head. "I even asked Betty last time we talked about Cat. She was vague. Didn't sit right with my spirit, but I didn't press. I should have pressed."

I reach across the table and cover her hand with mine. "Don't beat yourself up. We'll both be more vigilant from now on.

Apparently there have been a few incidents with the police department."

I relay what the cop told me and the not-so-subtle warning about social services getting involved unless we address Mama's living situation.

"A lot has to change," I conclude. "She can't go on like this."

"You already know she ain't leaving this house till she absolutely has to," Aunt Geneva says, taking a sip of lemonade. "Took thirty years to pay off this mortgage. She's lived here a long time. When you're losing your memory, being in a place where your life happened, where the past is at your fingertips, is important. It's reassuring."

"You're right." I rub my temples, resignation like a vise around my head. "It'll be hard to run my business from here. Everything's based in Atlanta. Most of my clients are there, but I'll figure it out."

"No, ma'am." Aunt Geneva's gaze connects with mine across the table. Compassion swirls in the dark brown of her eyes. "You don't have to uproot your life that way, Hendrix."

"I have to be with her. She needs…" The enormity of the journey ahead, with its inevitable tragic end, overwhelms me. The pressure of maintaining my livelihood so I can *afford* to make sure Mama never wants for anything over the long haul comes crashing on me and steals my words. Fear and panic fist my heart until my breath comes short.

Aunt Geneva stands and comes around the table, taking the seat beside me that Mama vacated. She frames my face with her hands.

"Betty won't leave yet," she says, a determined glint in her eye. "And while she can still remember her life in this place, I don't think she should, but I also don't think you need to move home to this backwoods town."

The sliver of humor in her voice soothes me long enough to return her small smirk.

"And she doesn't *want* you to have to do that, Hen," she says. "I'm an old woman, and them roots I got in Virginia ain't doing a thing for me. I'll move."

"Aunt G, no. You—"

"*I* am retired. Your cousin Ellie and the grands live in Costa Rica. They got the bar to run. Gerald and his family are stationed overseas. Till he's out of the army, I don't think they'll be back stateside anytime soon. I only get to see my kids a few times a year

as it is."

"But your life is in Virginia Beach."

"Girl, I'm seventy-seven years old. Husband passed. My kids ain't around. I grew up here. Still got friends here. Shoot, New Hope Baptist was my church till I married and moved with your uncle Robert." She chuckles and shakes her head. "They might not have even taken my name off the roll. I'll be back on the usher board before you know it."

"I can't let you do that."

"She's my sister, Hendrix. My baby sister, and she needs me." She leans forward to look in my eyes and taps the table with her index finger for emphasis. "There will come a time when your mama won't be able to stay at home, but she's still early in this. We gotta pace ourselves. Not just her, but you. Things will get worse, and we'll face another set of decisions. Harder decisions, but we're not there yet. I think you can stay in Atlanta, run your business and your life without much disruption, and come home every chance you get."

The idea floats through the chaos of my thoughts, taking a few seconds to settle. Aunt Geneva's plan will require many adjustments in how I run the business, how I run my life, but not as much as having to be here all the time would. It may be a temporary compromise we can all live with. It's probably the best we can do for now, but guilt still gnaws at my insides.

"Don't let that guilt eat you alive," Aunt Geneva says.

I stare at her, amazed how she and Mama sometimes seem to pluck the thoughts right out of my head.

"How do y'all do that?" I chuckle. "I couldn't get away with nothing growing up because seemed like Mama was always two steps ahead of every lie I tried to tell."

"We got discernment," Aunt Geneva replies with a wink and a smug smile. "God gon' always tell on you."

We both laugh at that, though I'm not sure she's joking. If there's one thing Mama and Aunt Geneva have always taken seriously, it's church.

"Are you sure?" I ask, the flash of humor squashed by the returning weight of worry.

"There is very little I've been sure of since Betty was diagnosed," Aunt Geneva says, blinking away tears. "But coming to live with my sister and taking care of her as long as I can—I never

been more sure of anything in my life."

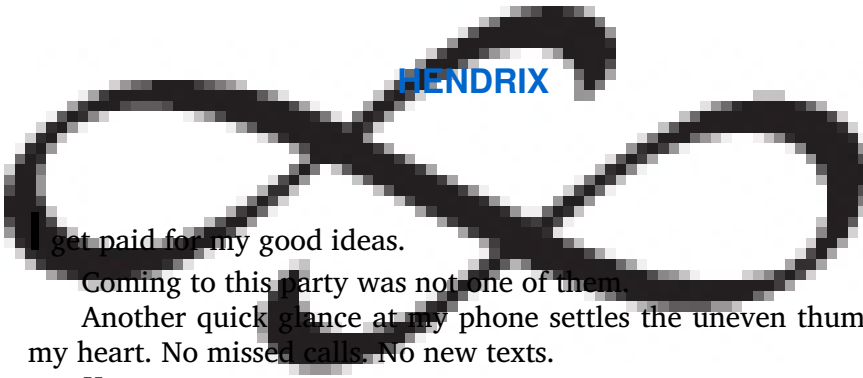
She pulls me close and tucks my face into the curve of her neck. My tears soak her shirt like I'm a child again. I can't help but think of Mama tonight, the small figure in the back seat of that police car.

It's funny how the tables turn.

Right now, I wish I could go back to being that child who counted on Mama and Daddy for everything. So far from the woman I've become who runs the world around her with a steady hand. I'm barely standing on wobbly legs and with a trembling heart, but I cannot afford to fail and I won't let her down.

The tables have turned, and now Mama's the one counting on me.

CHAPTER 1



HENDRIX

I get paid for my good ideas.

Coming to this party was not one of them.

Another quick glance at my phone settles the uneven thump of my heart. No missed calls. No new texts.

Yet.

My muscles tighten, braced for the call that hasn't come, and anxiety floods my nervous system as I wonder why my phone hasn't rung.

Damned if you do. Damned if you don't.

Mama has been better since Aunt Geneva moved in a few months ago. The doctor believes Ms. Catherine's death may have exacerbated Mama's symptoms, or at least proved destabilizing enough that some of her lapses after Ms. Cat's passing made sense. We can never really know, but taking her meds regularly, being more active, and having someone to watch out for her again seem to have improved Mama's situation, or at least gotten her back on track. I try to get home to see her and help out at least twice a month, though work has been so busy lately, carving out the time has proven more difficult.

"Check that phone again," whisper-warns the woman walking beside me, "and I'm tossing it in the bay."

Biscayne Bay butts up to a sprawling Miami mansion and my companion, Chapel—client turned good friend—may be right. I should relax for one night… while I can. I slip the phone into the pocket of my wide-legged white linen pants and turn up the wattage on my smile.

“No more phone,” I say with more confidence than I feel. “Party girl reporting for duty.”

And it *is* a duty. Copping an invite to one of the most exclusive parties of the year is cool, and I’m happy to be Chapel’s plus-one. She is my client, though, and despite the music thumping through the walls and the sea of beautiful people dressed in all white, this *is* work.

“Last year this time,” Chapel says as we approach the front door of the four-level glass-paned mansion, “I was watching celebrities post photos of this party. Now I’m at the All-White Party snapping my own.”

“It *is* the hottest ticket in town,” I agree. “We know firsthand that Zere throws a fantastic party.”

“That wrap party was bananas.” Chapel’s eyes go wide. “What a night.”

Zere, the host and an executive producer on the reality model competition *Lewks*, shut shit *down* with the wrap party at the end of the season.

“And you had a lot to celebrate,” I remind Chapel. “From that first episode, I knew you’d win.”

“You were probably the only one who thought so.” Chapel huffs out a laugh. “No one else was sitting at home predicting the five-foot-four chick with vitiligo would win a model competition.”

“Well, then they weren’t looking hard enough because that is exactly who took home the prize.” I give her a gentle shoulder bump. “Now everybody wants a piece of you.”

Athletic wear, soft drinks, perfume—as Chapel’s manager, I field requests every day from some new brand wanting in on her unexpected meteoric rise.

“‘Would you bury gold?’” Chapel asks softly when we reach the front door, pausing before we enter. “That’s what you said to the makeup artist on set who tried to cover up my vitiligo.”

“She was clueless.” I suck my teeth. “She *was* burying the gold, trying to hide what makes you most uniquely beautiful.”

Chapel stares at me, blinking all fast like she might cry, but instead she reaches up and throws her arms around my neck. I almost stumble with the force of her weight, even though she is no bigger than a minute.

“What the…” I laugh and return her squeeze. “You need to warn a sister before you launch yourself like that.”

“Just… thank you,” Chapel mumbles into my shoulder. “I wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t believed in me like you did.”

“Like I *do*,” I say, looking down at her pretty face with soft washes of pale pink a striking contrast over her dark brown skin. “We just getting started, boo. Now let’s show these folks how we get down.”

Despite the phone burning a hole in my pocket, I set out to have a good time, make some connections, and for one night forget the dilemma of Mama’s condition. I let out a low whistle when we enter the house. It’s a magnificent waterfront property with soaring ceilings and an abundance of natural light. The open floor plan flows seamlessly to a gorgeous tranquil pool. Limestone floors and stark white walls are touched with spots of color from sculptures, paintings, and oversized plants. It is somehow opulent *and* warm.

“I done seen some impressive shit,” Chapel says, her eyes roaming over the glass-and-chrome decor of the house, warmed with occasional touches of driftwood on the walls and tables. “But this that life. I mean I knew Zere’s man was rich as hell, but this? Another level.”

The sunken living room is decorated with what I *think* is custom-made Rick Owens furniture. The floor-to-ceiling windows offer a panoramic view of the bay.

“They say he reached billionaire status when he sold that video game,” I say.

“It’s a betting app,” Chapel corrects. “Called True Playahs. And yeah, I heard that, too.”

“They’ve been together for a while, right?” I frown, trying to remember any details the press managed to leak about Zere and her much-more-reserved mogul boyfriend.

“Coming up on three years, I think. When we talked on set,” Chapel says, lowering her voice as we wade into the stream of white-clad partygoers, “she seemed to think he’d be popping the question soon.”

“Oh, for real?” I grab a glass of some white drink in keeping with the theme from a server passing by—coconut something, piña colada—don’t care as long as it contains alcohol.

“Have you seen him?” Chapel asks.

“Maybe? I don’t *remember* seeing him before and that’s a shame since on principle I should know every Black billionaire on sight. Not that many of them.”

“Well, he’s not as public as Zere. Not in pictures much except around this time of year when they throw this party, and even then seems like the pictures folks post are of everyone except him. But he’s fine, and *this* rich?” She gestures to our luxurious surroundings. “Zere better not fumble that bag.”

“I don’t care how rich he is, *she* is the bag. *He* better not fumble *her*.” I pause with the glass hovering at my lips and give her a wicked look over the rim. “But how fine we talking?”

“Fine enough.” Chapel affects a shiver. “I saw him on set once. There’s just something about him. Power? Charisma? It goes deeper than looks. Whatever it is, our girl Zere is lucky it’s hers.”

At that moment, the lucky woman in question approaches, wearing a white halter top and a tiny skirt that shows her almost waifish figure to full advantage. A pleased smile creases Zere’s hazel eyes at the corners the tiniest bit. The contrast of her flawless golden skin and coppery hair creates the striking coloring the camera loves so much, a legacy of her Ethiopian mother and Irish father.

“You’re here,” Zere says, her light floral scent as entrancing as her sweet voice. “I’m so glad.”

“We wouldn’t have missed it.” I return her air-kisses at each cheek. “This is incredible, lady.”

When I first met Zere on the set of *Lewks*, I only had the things I’d heard and read to go on—a famous model in her late thirties staying relevant through a competition reality show. Over the course of the season, though, I realized there was more to her than the headlines and the parties and the billionaire boyfriend. For one, she’s a hustler, and that I always respect. So when Chapel won *Lewks* and Zere approached us about developing a show starring Chapel, we were all ears and all in. When she suggested I serve as an executive producer for the show—something I’ve wanted to get into for years—I liked her even more.

“Girl!” Zere blows out a laughing breath. “Planning this party almost took me out, but it’s worth it.”

“You have a beautiful home,” I tell her, allowing my gaze to wander over the luxuriously appointed space. “I mean… wow.”

“Thank you. Of all Mav’s properties, this one is my favorite.” Zere scans the stunning open area, and wistfulness creeps into her voice. “I’d live here year-round if I could, but Mav can’t seem to stay in one place that long, and he actually prefers his house in

Malibu."

Something shadows her expression, but before I can interpret the look, she smooths it back into the perfect serenity I've come to expect.

"You'll meet him later." She loops her arms through our elbows and directs us toward the huge open space where a wall would be in a lesser house, leading to the party outside in full swing. "Let's go get you a real drink."

People crowd around a bar as long and as well-stocked as you'd find in the finest establishments. An infinity pool with floating pavilions is the jeweled centerpiece of the area. The yard rolls out like a verdant green carpet down to the house's private dock jutting out into the bay. A pier of sorts floats over the water, decorated with overstuffed outdoor furnishings, a firepit, and yet another bar. Motorboats speed toward the deck ferrying more guests, all dressed in white. I recognize some famous faces—actors, rappers, models, high-profile figures from the worlds of business and entertainment. Black, white, brown, and everything in between. This party is renowned for assembling an impressive cross section of influential people. My shoulders move to the loud music and I sip the "real" drink Zere found for me, but I feel myself shifting into grind mode. Yes, it's a party, but it's also an opportunity.

And I always make the most of those.

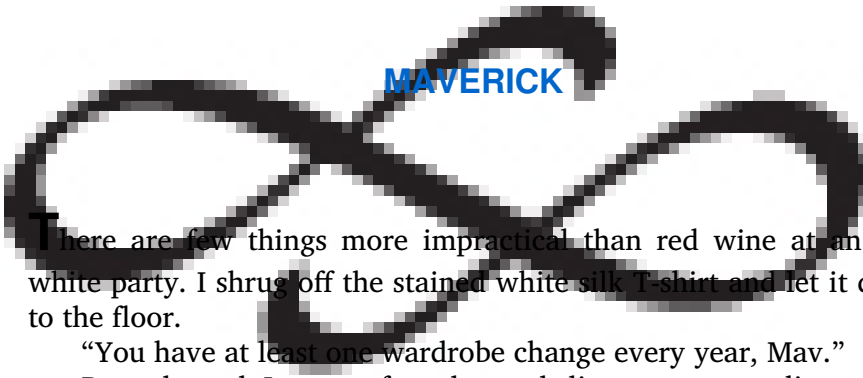
For a few minutes Zere stays with us, introducing us to people I know only from the tabloids. Even the most famous seem to feel at ease here. Maybe it's the tightness of the security, the carefully curated guest list, or the free-flowing libations. Whatever the reason, everyone is loose and before I know it, my default setting of *what you see is what you get* kicks in, and within the hour, I'm beside the DJ, directing him on what to play next. The phone rests heavily in my pocket, a reminder of my family's challenges beyond this bay. The air, sultry and sweet and throbbing with the cadence of revelry, washes over me. If for only a moment, it washes my troubles away.

"You got 'Jiggy Woogie'?" I ask, already winding my hips and anticipating that dancehall bop to drop.

He glances up and grins at me from the turntable, of which I approve because I'm old school like that. "You 'bout to turn this party out, ain't you?"

I shrug and flash him a sheepish grin. "It's what I do."

CHAPTER 2



MAVERICK

There are few things more impractical than red wine at an all-white party. I shrug off the stained white silk T-shirt and let it drop to the floor.

"You have at least one wardrobe change every year, Mav."

Bare-chested, I turn to face the reed-slim woman standing at the threshold connecting my closet to my bedroom.

With a chuckle, I reach for an almost-identical T-shirt and pull it over my head. "Whose bright idea was an all-white party anyway?"

Zere shutters her expression and approaches with a wry, humorless smile.

"Guilty as charged. It was definitely my idea." She scoops my wine-stained shirt from the floor and walks it over to the hamper in the far corner.

"You don't have to do that," I say with a frown.

"Picking up after you became a habit the last three years. One I can't seem to break yet."

She walks back to me and we stand almost nose to nose. Zere was made for magazines and runways and front pages. At five feet eleven inches shoeless, she matches my six two easily in heels. Sometimes she even stands above me an inch in her favorite mile-high stilettos. I'm convinced Zere could run a marathon in those things, she's so used to them.

Ironically, when we broke up a month ago, she called *me* a runner. I don't even know if she's wrong.

"The party's going well," I say, settling on a neutral subject that

won't cause trouble with more than 150 guests downstairs. "Great job, as usual."

"Yeah, well, guess I wanted to go out with a bang. If this is my last time throwing this party, I had to make it count."

Her words hang between us, tightening the air in the space we shared and she decorated.

"Look, Zee," I say on a resigned sigh. "I know this is awkward, but—"

"What could be awkward about hosting a party with your ex-boyfriend when no one knows you've called it quits?" Her laugh peals out brittle and harsh. "I'm having the time of my life."

"I told you we could've skipped. These parties are always more your thing and—"

"*My* thing?" A scoffing breath punctuates her disdain. "Find me the *Daily Mail* headline that says 'Zere O'Malley's All-White Party.' Please. A-list celebrities are not here on the strength of my brand or my bank account, and we both know it."

"What I mean is you always invested so much time and effort and care into these parties," I say, cupping her shoulders in my hands and squeezing gently. "I just had to show up with my checkbook and a white suit. Now that we're not together…"

She flinches, and I don't finish the thought, but surely she knows I don't give a damn about this party.

"I could…" She leans forward, lowers her lashes, swallows before going on. "I could still plan it even though we're just friends. I wouldn't mind."

I weigh my words before I say them. The last thing I want to do is hurt her more than our breakup already has, but she must see that wouldn't be healthy or smart for either of us.

"I don't think so, Zee," I finally reply, releasing my hold and carefully watching her face.

She's widely considered one of the most beautiful women in the world, as she should be. The first time I saw her, I'm pretty sure I stopped breathing. She has her catty moments, but generally she's kind and funny and pretty close to perfect. To say people were shocked when our relationship went public is an understatement. She—the model socialite and fashion world darling. Me—a borderline antisocial businessman most people would have to google to know. The official statement we'll release after this party will say our breakup was mutual. And in a way it was. She wanted

marriage and a baby. My daughter is graduating from high school, and I don't want to start over. Just as I'm finally getting an empty nest, Zere realized she wants to fill hers. Neither of us was willing to budge, so… is that mutual? Her ultimatum. My refusal.

The sobs coming from the guest room down the hall the night we broke up didn't sound mutual. They sounded heartbroken. I sat on the edge of the bed, head in my hands, while her tears tore at my heart.

"You're right, of course," Zere says, hurt standing liquid in her eyes. "About the party. I guess it just stings seeing how badly you want me out of your life."

The wobble in her voice wrings something in my chest.

"Damn, Zee." I run my hand across the back of my neck and grit my teeth. "You know that's not it. I'll always care for you."

"Don't patronize me." A tear slips over the smoothness of her cheek, streaking through her expertly applied makeup. "Emotionally, I mean. Don't look after my feelings and say shit you don't mean to make me feel better."

"I'm not—"

"I'll have all my stuff out after the party," she cuts in, swiping carefully at the tears. "Movers come Monday."

"There's no rush." I clear my throat. "I'm rarely even here."

I bought this house a few months before we got serious, but Zere is stamped on every square inch of it. When *Architectural Digest* featured it last year, referring to it as our "party house," Zere prepared as one would for the Olympics. I've steered clear of Miami since the breakup, bouncing between my apartment in Manhattan and my place in Malibu. She would be pissed to know last month when I had business in Miami, I stayed at the Ritz because I knew she was here. My movers will be right behind hers because I'm selling the house she loves so much. I think losing this place might break her heart more than losing me.

Is she losing me?

Did she ever have me? Did I have her?

The sex was fantastic. Hell, our breakup sex was actually top ten. She's a smart woman, and I was never bored. We had goals as a couple. It always felt like she was propelling us forward, like we were on our way… up. We were always *striving*. And as much as I'm driven in business, my personal life is not for climbing. I work hard and I want to rest. I never felt like I could rest with Zere. Not that I

don't crave adventure. Adrenaline is practically my recreational drug, but attending the next exclusive party, making another list, appearing on Page Six—none of that matters to me, but it always has to Zere. So the marriage and baby ultimatum may have felt like the final straw, but somewhere in the back of my mind, in unacknowledged corners of my heart, I knew our paths would eventually diverge.

"You say there's no rush," Zere mutters, stepping back and smoothing the white miniskirt over her hips. "But I know you're ready for this to be over. You hate loose ends."

"You're not a loose end. You're my friend, Zere. I hope you always will be." I grab her hands, and dip the inch to look her squarely in the eyes. "And I hope you get everything you want. Everything I wasn't able to give you."

"Wasn't able to? Or wasn't willing?" She snatches her hands back. "Pretty sure your sperm count is high enough and we were practically married already."

I don't dispute her, though I've seen a good marriage in my parents, and Zere and I were never "practically married."

"Let's not do this." I leave the closet and head into the bedroom, trusting that she'll follow. "Not now with a houseful of people having a good time. Come on."

I extend my hand, waiting for her to take it so we can present a united front this one last time. It's a miracle our breakup hasn't leaked to the press, but neither of us have told many people. My dad and a few close friends know, but I can trust them to keep it to themselves and let us share the news on our own terms.

Zere takes my hand and studies our entwined fingers. Her mouth trembles for a second, but she marshals her face into the mask she wants it to be. The beautiful visage that has graced every major magazine cover. She offers one jerk of a nod, almost like she's having a silent conversation with herself, and moves toward the stairs.

I love this house most when it's full of people. So really only once a year. When Zere suggested we throw an all-white party the first summer of our relationship, I had no idea this would become one of the most coveted invitations.

The massive glass wall leading to the backyard from the living room is folded back, opening to a dazzling view of the bay. There's a swirl of bodies, all dressed in white, mingling, drinking, dancing

outside. Servers circulate with trays of food you can easily eat with your hands. A few adventurous guests are playing volleyball in the pool… fully dressed.

I've had so little downtime lately, this isn't really how I want to spend one of my few free Saturday evenings. But this is the last time. I can at least give Zere this.

"I want you to meet Chapel," Zere says, reminding me we still have one last appearance to get through.

"She's the one who won *Lewks*, right?" I ask, frowning and trying to recall the details.

"Right. If you'd ever actually made it to set this season, you could have met her."

I draw in a breath through my nose and force myself not to respond harshly. "I actually did come a few times. Not as much as I would have liked, but you know I've been slammed with the sale of True Playahs."

"Oh, I'm quite aware just how important your work is," Zere half laughs.

I've been negotiating the biggest deal of my life, as complex as the Riemann hypothesis, and she expected me to sit around on the set of her reality show waiting for her to take a break? I would never have pulled her away from something as professionally vital as this deal was for me. Didn't I show support in other ways? Me showing up to sit around set wouldn't have changed the fact that we have been headed to this end for at least the last year.

"Zee, I—"

"Here's Chapel," she cuts in, plastering a smile on her face, waving and drawing the attention of a woman I vaguely recognize. Petite with closely cropped hair tinted pink. Zere grabs her hand and draws her forward. "Chapel, I want you to meet… this is my… uh… this is Maverick Bell."

"Hmmmm." Chapel is mid-swallow, gulping and passing a slim hand over her mouth to catch the drink spilling over. "Sorry! Hi! I've heard so much about you."

"It's nice to meet you," I say. "Congratulations on winning. That's really cool."

"Thank you." She beams, her expression brightening even more if possible. "And thank you for having us."

"Where's Hendrix?" Zere asks, glancing around.

"Girl, you know Hen." Chapel shakes her head, a smile coming

easily to her lips. “She out there taking over.”

She nods to the backyard where guests dance and cluster in conversations.

“I should have known.” Zere laughs beside me and points to a group assembled near the firepit. “Hendrix is the life of every party.”

I follow the direction of her gaze and narrow my eyes to focus. A woman stands on the stone wall surrounding the pool, which slightly elevates her over maybe twenty guests gathered around. The DJ is playing “Candy” by Cameo. From her perch this woman stands on the dais and leads the small crowd of dancers in the electric slide.

Her face is lit not just by the late-setting sun or the pool lights that have already come on as darkness approaches, but illuminated by something *inside*. She is luminous with skin the color of rich cocoa. The flash of her pink tongue is delicately clenched between the boldness of a smile built from straight white teeth and absolute radiance. A cloud of coiling natural curls halos her striking face, the Afro dark and full and luxuriant. She’s tall, maybe matching Zere, but where Zere is slender, almost fragile, Hendrix has a homegrown thickness that is tight in some places and voluptuous in others. She is long lines and deep curves. Lush and ripe like summer fruit.

A handful.

The description makes me grin because she would overflow a man’s hands with the cursive swell of her breasts and hips and ass, yes, but the energy she’s emitting, stepping and hopping and twisting as she leads everyone through the slide, hints that she would be a handful. She would be… a lot.

“Who is she?” I force myself to look away from her and return my attention to Zere and Chapel.

“Hendrix?” Chapel answers with a grin. “She’s my manager.”

“Seems to be having fun,” I reply, keeping my tone and expression indifferent, though one glimpse of this Hendrix manager person leaves me wanting to stare.

“Always does,” Zere says with a wry smile. “Chapel, there’s someone I want you to meet. It’s this executive from the network. He’s really excited about the potential of your show.”

Zere’s glance my way is a tangle of reserve and reluctance. “You’ll be fine if I mingle a little, Mav?”

“Of course. I should mingle some, too, I guess, huh?”

She knows stuff like this, sometimes people like this, bore me, and some of the stiffness melts at the edges of her eyes and mouth. She leans over and kisses my cheek, letting her lips rest against my face for an extra beat, before pulling away. Her smile goes stiff again, rigid with hiding her emotions. Since she's shit at hiding from me, I'm glad she turns away so I don't have to see what's there. There's an ache in my chest knowing I'm the cause of it.

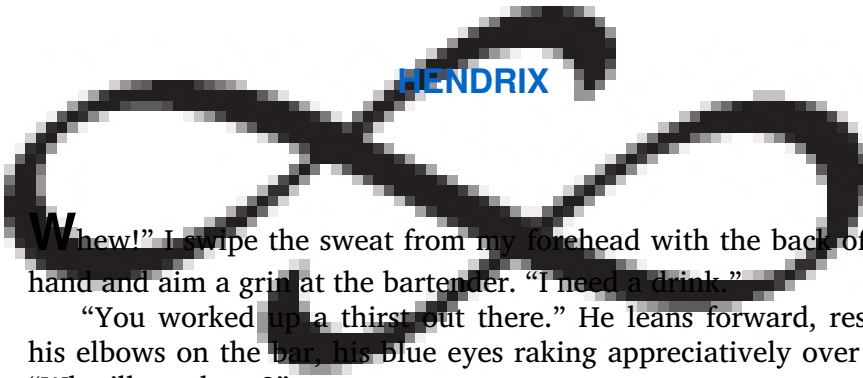
"Go," I tell her softly, patting her hip with a fond smile before turning to Chapel. "It was really nice meeting you."

"Great meeting you, too. I guess we'll see more of each other soon," Chapel says, "since Zere and I will be working together."

My gaze snags briefly with Zere's over the secret we only have to keep one more night. And then the world will know what we have for some time.

That this—that we—are over.

CHAPTER 3



HENDRIX

"Whew!" I swipe the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand and aim a grin at the bartender. "I need a drink."

"You worked up a thirst out there." He leans forward, resting his elbows on the bar, his blue eyes raking appreciatively over me. "What'll you have?"

I lean forward a little, too, letting him look his fill, cleavage on display in the fitted white top that doesn't quite meet the waistband, baring a strip of my stomach. I know I look good tonight, but damn. This white boy is looking at me like I'm a Hershey's Kiss. Drooling and shit.

"Your call," I tell him, flashing a flirty smile that won't go anywhere. He's cute, but I need *swagger*. This guy wouldn't know what to do with all this. "What's your favorite drink tonight?"

His smile broadens. "Golden Cadillac."

"Ahhhh. I like the sound of that."

"You'll love it. Galliano, white crème de cacao, and heavy cream." He kisses his fingers to his lips. "Trust me on this one."

I let a chuckle roll out, wiggling to settle on the barstool, and give a decisive nod. "Let's do it."

He slaps the bar. "Coming right up."

While he prepares the drink, a few guests come by, laughing and fist-pounding me. Apparently I made some new friends on the dance floor. Cameo brings the people together.

"That was so much fun," a blond girl I recognize from a Hulu sitcom says. "Been a long time since I danced like that."

I smile, wave as she goes, and accept the drink the flirtatious

bartender offers.

"Oooh, thank you," I say, studying a glass of thick white liquid garnished with orange peel. "This looks fantastic."

I take the first sip, meeting his expectant eyes with a moan. "Hmmm. So good."

"Told you," he says. A trio of girls fresh from the pool drip at the other end of the bar, summoning him over for their drink orders. "Lemme take care of them. Enjoy."

I'm poised to pull out my phone and make sure I didn't miss any calls, when I feel the weight of eyes on me. I turn my head and have to force myself not to whip right back around. There's a man studying me intently, and he doesn't look away or flinch when I catch him staring. I force myself to hold the intensity of the dark gaze flecked with curiosity.

The man is nothing so simple as handsome, an arrangement of features to please the eye. It's the way he's built that draws attention. He's dark golden brown, skin the shades of sun and sienna. His hair is buzzed down close, brown, but glinting with gold above dark slashing brows, high cheekbones, and a luxuriant splay of lashes. His mouth is wide and his lips are full, framed by the bones of his face—hard, blunt, striking. Those eyes rest on me in an unwavering stare that might disconcert another woman. Me? I just stare right back, assessing him as much as he's assessing me.

Tit, meet tat.

"Um, hello," I say, lifting both brows. "Can I help you?"

He tilts his head, humor warming his gaze. "What makes you think I need help?"

"Not literal help." I roll my eyes.

"I *can* be very literal," he says with a chuckle.

"You were staring."

"Was I?"

"You know you were."

"I thought you had something right…" He gestures to his top lip.

"Oh, for real?" My hand flies to my mouth and I start wiping. "Did I get it?"

His lips twitch and he bends a little at the waist, laughter shaking the strong slope of shoulders beneath his white shirt. "Made ya look."

I bite into my grin and feign indignation. "Wow. Real mature."

“Says the woman who was standing on a table doing the electric slide.”

“It was not on a table, and nobody made you watch.”

His smile seems to waver a little, before locking back into place. “You were kind of hard to miss.”

I take a sip of my drink, clearing my throat and searching for a reply. “You should have come out there and danced with us.”

He swings around so that he’s facing my side and props his elbows on his knees, bringing him a little closer. His clean scent wafts between us. “I don’t dance.”

“Don’t or can’t?” I tease.

“Under the right circumstances, I can dance, but mostly… don’t.”

“And what constitutes the right circumstances?”

“Oh, I’ll know it when I see it.”

We’re not exactly flirting, but I feel completely focused on him right now. Like the whole party is a blur in my periphery and this man has come into sharp focus ever since he sat his fine ass down beside me. There is a current running through our light conversation. It buzzes beneath my skin and disrupts my composure. My belly flips every time he flashes that smile full of white teeth and charisma. I can’t physically feel the heat of his body, but my cheeks get warmer the longer our eyes hold. Melanin hides my blush, but there is no hiding from the feeling. The way my breath shallows when he slants a look over to me. The way my fingers tremble just the tiniest bit around the stem of the glass at the deep rumble of his voice.

This man… *shit.*

We’ve spent all of two minutes together and already… he could get it? A hard maybe. On vibes and looks alone, not that I select partners based on superficial things, but… those lips and eyes and the bones. The hard curve of his biceps and that bitable tendon stretching up his neck.

And the all-caps SWAGGER on this dude.

Damn. You don’t often meet men like this in real life. I might have to pinch myself to wake up from this wet dream sitting in front of me.

“What do you do?” I ask, not sure if I’m actually curious or just searching for something that will keep the two of us right here a little longer.

He narrows his eyes, studying me as if trying to gauge if that's a serious question.

"Uh… business, investments," he says after a small pause.

"Investments." I take a sip of my drink. "I'm kind of in business and investments, too."

"Really?" He quirks a brow. "How so?

"Well, I'm a talent manager. One of my clients is here tonight, but in addition to running my management firm, a few of my sorors and I started a venture capital fund focused on Black women–led businesses."

"That's fantastic." His gaze sharpens with interest. "What's the fund called?"

"It's the Aspire Fund. We're about six years into our first funding cycle and we're raising our second fund now."

"Going well?"

"Oh, very."

"Impressive. What made you want to get involved with that?"

I circle the rim of my glass with one almond-shaped nail, following the motion instead of meeting his eyes.

"My mother. She's a small business owner. She bakes cakes. Really, cupcakes, brownies, pastries—anything sweet and special, she does it." I draw a sharp breath. "Well, she used to."

Before he can dig into the past tense, I rush on.

"But it was always a struggle. It was never what it could have been. Maybe that was because she always put us before anything for herself—my dad and me. But it was also because there was never enough money to really do what she wanted to do. If she'd had a leg up like, resources and support, maybe we'd be buying her desserts at the grocery store today. She was that good."

"That's really cool."

"Thank you. We also award grants to women starting businesses who may not be as far along in the process as our founders seeking larger investment. Not much, but it helps. We split our energy between the grants and the founders for venture capital."

"You still need LPs?"

I blink, a little startled by the question. I'm often pitching and selling and persuading, but big investors don't like to be schmoozed. I never do that at parties. I'm not used to someone just asking if we're seeking limited partners.

"That wasn't, like… a hint," I tell him. "I wasn't angling for you

to get involved or anything."

"I didn't think you were." He shrugs. "I get pitched a lot of stuff. Pretty much constantly, so I know when someone's trying to get into my wallet, Hendrix."

"I guess you…" My brain quickly computes a vital piece of information. "How do you know my name?"

"Chapel pointed you out to me." He grins. "You were busy leading the electric slide."

"Chapel, my client?" I stare at him as though the answer to a riddle might be printed on his face. "How do you know Chapel?"

"She and Zere worked together on *Lewks*."

My brows snap in and then up. "So you're—"

"Maverick."

Ohhhh. Our billionaire host.

"And Zere is your—"

"Girlfriend." He presses his lips together. "Yeah, my, uh, girlfriend."

I've spent the last five minutes in a low-grade heat for the man practically engaged to my new producing partner.

Rewind.

"I didn't realize." I smooth my voice out to something even and more formal. "So this is your party."

"That's what they tell me." He glances around the backyard packed with glitter and glamour and celebrities en masse.

"It's great. Thanks for having me," I say, replacing the borderline flirtatious tone from before with politeness. "It's nice to finally meet you, Mr.—"

"Call me Maverick." His dark brows dip into a frown. "You were telling me about the Aspire Fund. I'd still like to hear more about it."

"Oh, that." I lift the glass to my lips, dismayed to find the orange peel is all that's left of my Golden Cadillac. I could really use another.

"How was that?" Flirty Bartender asks right on cue.

Look at God. He may not come when you want Him, but He always comes on time.

"It was great." I raise the glass. "I'll have another."

"Coming right up." He shifts his gaze to Maverick. "Mr. Bell? The usual? Maker's Mark?"

"My man," Maverick drawls. "You remembered."

“Same drink every year,” Flirty says. “Already looking forward to the next party.”

Maverick’s expression clouds for an instant.

“I’m nothing if not predictable.” He accepts the drink Flirty Bartender slides to him.

Predictable my ass. I don’t believe that for a minute. If this is Maverick Bell, then this man just joined the tiny exclusive club of Black billionaires with the sale of his sports betting app. You don’t build a whole platform around risk and luck without absorbing some of it into who you are.

“So with your fund,” he says, turning back to me.

“Mav.” A tall man interrupts, taking the stool beside him. “Wondered where you’d gotten to.”

“Ralph,” Maverick says, his eyes and voice cooling a few degrees. “Glad you could make it.”

“Great party as usual,” Ralph replies. “While I have you here, I wanted to pick your brain about—”

“Call the office Monday and we can talk then.” Maverick knocks back some of his Maker’s, setting the glass down with a thud and not looking at Ralph, but studying the bar. “Enjoy the party. Yeah?”

The man opens his mouth like he has more to say, but Maverick lifts his eyes to meet Ralph’s and whatever he wanted to offer seems to dry up on his thin lips.

“Monday sounds great,” Ralph finally says, his smile a little stiff. “I’m gonna go… enjoy the party.”

“Great idea.” Maverick’s smile is a dismissal and the glance he flicks away from Ralph and back to his glass, a send-off.

“Looks like office hours are open,” Flirty Bartender says, glancing just beyond Maverick’s shoulder. “He pulled the rock from the dam. You’re gonna be flooded now.”

I follow the line of the bartender’s gaze. There are no fewer than five guests in some state of… hover. Like they’re gauging Maverick’s mood. Waiting for some unspoken signal that it’s okay to approach. But he’s not giving any indication that he wants to do anything besides drain his drink and sit here unbothered.

I sip the last of my second Golden Cadillac and stand, turning to him with a polite smile pasted on my face. “It was really nice meeting you, Mr.—”

“Maverick,” he cuts in with a frown. “You’re leaving? I wanted to hear more about the fund. It sounds like something I might want

to be part of."

When he said that earlier, I thought *how nice*. Now, knowing who he is, and how much money could potentially flow to the fund from a man this wealthy, this powerful, my heart treble beats. But he just turned away someone who wanted in his pocket, or into his mind, which based on how bright I've heard he is, amounts to the same thing. I don't want to impose at a social event.

"It can hold," I say, offering a quick smile. "I'll call your office."

Not only is he a potential LP and my host, but he is Zere's man. I'm slightly mortified by the attraction I didn't try to hide before I knew who he was. Not cool at all. But then… I may have gotten my signals mixed, but it felt like *he* wanted to keep talking—like we were vibing. Like the attraction was not one-way, and that would be even *less* cool. I hope Zere's man is not a bitch-ass cheater.

"You're based in LA?" he asks. "New York?"

"Atlanta."

I flick a cursory glance his way, not lingering on the compelling features and the magnetic aura that, even though he is sidelined at the bar, somehow make him feel like the center of the party. Like just by moving, he's shifted the axis of everything. Now that I understand it, I'm attuned to the eyes on us. To the sense of anticipation coming off the guests who have taken enough steps, gotten close enough, that as soon as I leave, they can pounce.

"Could I get your number so I can call?" he asks. "To discuss the fund, I mean."

It makes perfect sense that I would give a prospective partner my information so we could follow up. Of course, I should, but somehow it feels like there is something else behind his request, even though his expression remains blank as a beige wall.

I'm still debating with myself, probably needlessly, when Zere and Chapel sidle up to the bar, sliding into the sliver of space between my stool and Maverick's.

"Sorry about that, babe," Zere says, plucking Maverick's glass from his hand and taking a sip. "I wanted to catch Harry before he left. Make sure he met Chapel."

"No problem," Maverick says. "I mingled like you told me to and found your manager, Chapel."

Zere's gaze lands on me as if she's only now realizing I'm here. "Oh, Hen. I see you met my Maverick."

The "my" in that sentence is totally unnecessary if she's subtly

warning me off.

Girl, I don't want your man.

I mean… he's fine as hell, but I don't mess with taken dudes, no matter how fine and successful and funny and… despite him being all of that, that's never how I roll.

"Yup," I say, smiling at her with a clear gaze and showing I have nothing to hide. "It was nice meeting you. Well, I'd better—"

The phone buzzing in my pocket cuts that thought off at the knees. I grab it, dread dropping inside me like an anchor when Aunt Geneva's contact flashes on the screen.

"'Scuse me. I need to take this," I tell them, turning slightly away. "Hey, Aunt G. What's up?"

"I'm so sorry to bother you," she says, strain apparent in her voice.

"You're not bothering me." I take another step away from the group. "What's up?"

"You know I usually do my Bible study on Wednesdays."

I hold back a sigh and check my exasperation. Aunt Geneva would choose the scenic route to her own closet. It takes her forever to get to the point.

"I know, Aunt G," I say, struggling to hold on to my patience. "What's going on?"

"Well, they had a prayer service tonight for Sister Marian. Her baby girl Candace is in the hospital and they—"

"I'm sorry to hear that. What exactly… Is Mama okay?"

"So I went to the prayer service tonight, and the nurse came to sit with her."

"Okay."

Teeth gritting. Pulse picking up. Fingers clenching.

"I just got back 'bout fifteen minutes ago and she was in a state," Aunt Geneva continues.

"What kind of state?" My brows collapse into a deep frown.

"She's dumped the potted plants and stripped the beds and is saying the house is bugged or something. You know how she gets sometimes."

"Yeah. I… I know."

"Well, the caregiver got her calmer, but she's still just… agitated." Aunt Geneva pauses and then presses ahead. "Maybe you could help?"

Help is the last thing I feel like I could do. I live with a

perennial sense of helplessness these days.

"Sure," I say with a confidence I've learned to fake. "What do you need? I can try to catch the next flight out—"

"No, no, you were just here. I know you're busy and have a business to run. I don't need you to come back so soon. I wondered, though, if you could do that thing you did last time."

"What thing I…"

Oh. That thing.

I gulp past the hot knot crowding my throat, and nod even though my aunt can't see. "Sure, Aunt G. Put her on."

In the thirty or so seconds of silence while I wait for Aunt Geneva to put my mother on the phone, I brace myself for what the next few minutes will hold.

"Hello?" Mama asks when she comes on. Everything feels like a question these days, which underlines her uncertainty navigating a world that looks a little different to her every day she wakes.

"Hey, Bet," I say, using the name my mother's family always called her by.

"Ma?" my mother asks, her voice going breathless with hope and relief. "Is that you?"

I lick my lips and blink at the tears stinging the corners of my eyes. I had half hoped this wouldn't work—that my mother wouldn't be so lost in the dark corridor of her mind that she would immediately know I'm her daughter, but it's the same as the last time she got this agitated. Over the phone, with only my voice for reference, she thinks I'm her mother, and it brings her peace.

"Yeah," I say, clearing my throat. "It's me. You okay?"

"I don't… I don't know." Her voice thins, shedding years and leaving her sounding like a little girl. "Something ain't right, and they aren't telling me the truth. And I think someone was in my room going through my things. They always—"

"No one's going through your things. Remember I told you last time. It's just you and Geneva in the house. You know your sister loves you, right?"

"Y-yeah." It's a stilted affirmation, hesitant, but clinging to trust. "But I could've sworn…"

I give her a moment to sort through the debris of the memories crowding her mind, to make sense of everything her brain keeps rendering senseless.

"Could you sing to me, Mama?" she asks after a few seconds.

“You know the one?”

I know the one.

I was maybe twelve years old when we first watched *Sister Act 2* and listened to Lauryn Hill sing “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.”

Your grandmother used to sing this to me, Mama had said. *It was her favorite hymn.*

And this song, these worn lyrics, always manage to reach through time and space and darkness to light Mama’s way back. I take another step away from the bar, cognizant of the three people I abandoned to answer this call. It’s not that I’m ashamed, but this is private. It’s Mama at her most vulnerable, her most lost, and I want to cover her like she covered me so many times over the years.

“Why should I feel discouraged,” I sing softly, pressing a finger to my other ear as my voice runs headlong into the song the DJ is blasting. “Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart feel lonely and long for heaven and home?”

I draw a deep breath, the reverent words juxtaposed against Lil Jon screaming from the window to the wall at the top of his A-town lungs.

“When Jesus is my portion. A constant friend is He. His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me. I sing because I’m happy. I sing because I’m free. His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me.”

The final note melts into the little bit of silence Mama and I share, and my eyes prick with tears. Whether it’s the spiritual lyrics or the sadness of the moment, I’m not sure.

“Yes,” Mama sighs, finally sounding more like herself. “I love that one.”

“I know,” I choke out, blinking to keep the tears from falling in the middle of the party. “You feel better?”

“I do.”

“I think you should go lie down, yeah?”

I hold my breath, hoping against hope she doesn’t disagree.

“Okay,” she says after another beat. “I-I’ll go lie down.”

“Is your sister still there? Can you give the phone to Geneva?”

There’s a bit of a shuffle as Mama hands the phone back to my aunt.

“Night, Bet,” Aunt Geneva calls before turning her attention to me. “Thank you. I hate to bother you.”

“Please don’t hesitate, Aunt G. Nothing’s more important. I’m

just glad that trick still works. One day it may not."

"I'm glad, too." Aunt Geneva chuckles. "You do sound like Ma."

"I do?" I ask ruefully.

"Yeah, she had a deep voice like yours. I can see how it calms Bet. Thinking Ma's back."

"Well, I hope she stays calm for the rest of the night."

"She should. I'll give her some tea in a bit."

"Thank you. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

We disconnect and I take a few seconds to compose myself. It always throws me, being mistaken for someone else in my mother's past, usually my grandmother. It's only happened a few times, but it makes me that much more desperate to spend as much time as I can with my mother while she still knows me.

"Everything okay?" Chapel asks, stepping close and laying a gentle hand on my arm. "Your mom?"

"Yeah." I cover her hand with mine and offer a weary smile. "Got a little agitated."

Zere and Maverick stand closer now, too, giving us space to breathe, but obviously in earshot. They probably heard everything.

"My mother," I say, turning my head to catch their curious gazes. "She has Alzheimer's."

"Oh, Hen," Zere gasps. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"It's fine." I shrug. "I mean, it actually sucks, but it is what it is."

"My grandfather had it," Maverick adds softly, his brows bunched over the dark concern of his eyes.

"Had?" I ask, looking directly at him and bracing myself for the truth of the past tense that will find me eventually.

"He…" Maverick glances down for a second before looking back up to meet my eyes squarely. "He passed away."

Of course. There is no reverse. No getting better. There is holding for a while and then there is getting worse. Those are the only two gears, and this disease eventually just runs your brain into a ditch, heedless of the lifelong memories plowed under its wheels.

"I think I'll take a quick walk," I manage, reaching to set my empty glass on the bar. I turn away, saying over my shoulder, "I'll be back. Just need a sec."

Without waiting for a response, I stride toward the nearly deserted dock. The bay looks serene as the sun sets. My feet speed up, taking me to the edge of the water in a few steps, in a matter of

seconds. I stand there and let the slightest breeze caress my face. I fight back fresh tears and soothe myself by humming a hymn from better days.

CHAPTER 4

MAVERICK

Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned my grandfather.

It obviously upset Hendrix when I admitted that he's gone now. The years from the time he was diagnosed until his body finally surrendered to the ravaging of his mind were some of the hardest my family experienced. My mother became his primary caregiver, and the burden was beyond what anyone should have to endure.

"I hate that for Hen," Chapel says, resting her back and elbows on the bar and looking out over the crowd. "I hoped she'd get through the whole party without that happening."

"Does her mom have a nurse or something?" Zere asks.

"Someone comes in to help when needed," Chapel says. "But her aunt Geneva moved in a few months ago from Virginia. Hendrix goes home all the time. Her mom doesn't want to go to a facility until it's absolutely necessary."

"Makes sense," I say, nodding. "My grandfather stayed home until we had no other choice."

"Hendrix would love for her mom to move to Atlanta." Chapel sips her drink and her sympathetic gaze follows her friend down to the pier, "but she doesn't want to leave the house that's been her home for decades."

"Well, being in familiar surroundings *is* good for them," I agree. "Less disorienting than moving somewhere new."

"You know a lot about this." Zere frowns at me. "I don't remember you talking about your grandfather having Alzheimer's."

I shrug. "I think I mentioned it once or twice, but he passed away before we met. I guess it just never came up much."

“Hmmm.” Zere eyes me curiously like she’s wondering what other secrets I’ve kept hidden. It seems these days like she’s always trying to decode me; figure out what went wrong between us and where and how she missed it.

“Oh, my gosh,” Chapel squeaks, covering her mouth with one hand. “Is that Grip James over there?”

Zere nods, a grin denting her cheeks. “Yes. Did I forget to tell you he’s performing right before the fireworks?”

“Fireworks?” Chapel’s brows lift. “Y’all doing it big.”

“You want to meet him?” Zere tilts her head over to where Grip James, a popular rapper, and his wife, Bristol, stand by the pool.

“Uh, yeah. Duh.” Chapel stands up straight and runs a hand needlessly over her neat hair. “Yes, please.”

“He’s cool and so down-to-earth,” Zere says. “They both are.”

“He should be down-to-earth,” I half grumble. “Much as I’m paying his ass to perform two songs.”

Zere gives me a wry glance. “I think you can afford it, babe.”

That’s the thing about getting money. Somebody is always counting your cash for you, telling you what you can afford. I’m not a stingy dude, but my mom was the best haggler I ever met. I’ll never shake the art of getting the most out of a dollar.

“You coming?” Zere asks me. Her elbow is looped through Chapel’s and they’re both practically buzzing with anticipation.

“Nah.” I shake my head. “Think I’ll camp out here for a bit.”

“Not a Grip fan?” Chapel asks, her eagerness unmoved by my indifference.

“He aight.” I laugh at Zere’s horrified expression. “I mean, he ain’t Nas or Talib or Rakim or—”

“Oh, you got them old-ass ears.” Chapel chuckles, her voice lilting with humor.

“If I’m old so is Grip. He’s my age.” I twist my lips up and scoff. “He a good forty.”

“I don’t care how old he is,” Zere interjects. “It’s our party. We deserve a little meet and greet. Come on, Chapel.”

They walk off in the direction of the small group of people clustered around Grip and his wife, and my gaze drifts back to the pier. I’ve been forcing myself to *not* look down there where Hendrix stands alone, but now I can’t stop myself. Not because she’s beautiful. She definitely is, but that’s not why I sat down beside her at the bar. After watching her enthrall a group of people into

dancing to her tune, I was drawn to the woman who so effortlessly compelled half the people at my party to eat from the palm of her hand. For the last twenty years identifying the exceptional and capitalizing on it has been my job. It's an impossible habit to break, and Hendrix was much too exceptional to ignore.

I wasn't flirting with her. I don't think I crossed any lines. I would never disrespect Zere that way publicly. Even though we both know our relationship is done, no one else here does. Something about Hendrix drew me, though, beyond the obvious physical appeal. There's a boldness to her that tricks you, as strength often does, into believing there's no soft spots.

No sooner had I adjusted to the bravado of her, I got to see the vulnerability. I can still hear the haunting tones of that hymn she sang to calm her mother. My mom found little rituals like that to ease my grandfather's way until at the end, he was so lost that none of those things mattered. That's what waits at the end of this road, and my heart contracts for Hendrix and her mother.

"Hey, Brad," I call to the bartender. He glances up from the drink he's pouring.

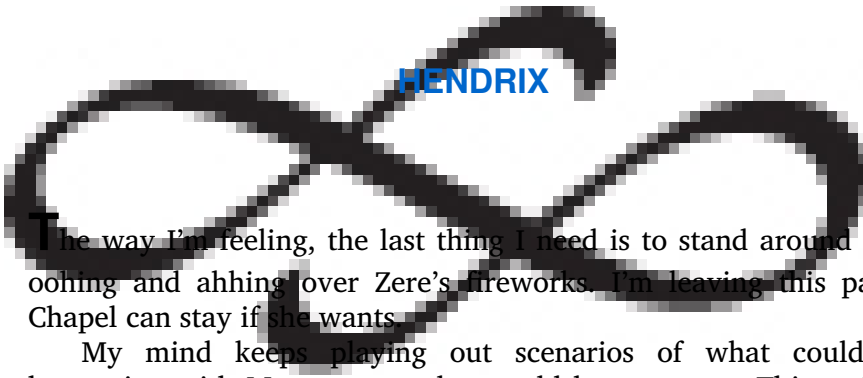
"Yeah, boss?" He slides the drink down the bar with a smile to the guy waiting before turning back to me. "What's up?"

"The woman who was here earlier." I gesture to the seat Hendrix had occupied before Chapel and Zere approached. "What was she drinking?"

"Golden Cadillac." He clears the empty glass Hendrix left on the bar. "She need another?"

"Yeah." I glance down to the pier where she still stands alone. "I think she might."

CHAPTER 5



HENDRIX

The way I'm feeling, the last thing I need is to stand around fake oohing and ahhing over Zere's fireworks. I'm leaving this party. Chapel can stay if she wants.

My mind keeps playing out scenarios of what could be happening with Mama now, what could happen next. Things Aunt Geneva wouldn't want to "bother me" about.

What if she gets out again? Wanders, this time into the street at night? We have keyless, coded locks on the doors now, but you never know.

I turn, determined to march back up that hill to catch an Uber and the next flight to Charlotte. I run into a wall of muscled chest before I can take even one full step.

"Sorry." I glance up a few inches. "Oh, Maverick! Hey."

"Hey." He proffers a glass, another Golden Cadillac. "Thought maybe you could use this after that call."

I study the strong lines of his face, softened a little with sympathy.

"Thanks." I take the drink and lift the glass for a cooling sip. "I needed this."

"Yeah, I know the feeling. It's not an easy diagnosis."

"Easy?" I lick the traces of liquor from my lips, laughing mirthlessly and turning my attention back to the bay, its tranquility so at odds with the emotion churning in my chest. "No, it's definitely not that."

"I'm sorry I mentioned it," he says, standing beside me and facing the water. "About my grandfather passing. It's not what you

want to think about at this stage."

"It's all I can think about. The end and everything that leads up to it." I slide him a glance. "Was it your paternal or maternal grandfather?"

"Maternal. My mom was determined to look after him herself as much as she could."

"How is she now that he's gone?"

He hesitates an almost imperceptible moment, and then turns his head to meet my eyes. "She died not too long after he did."

"Oh, my God." I touch his forearm, compassion closing my fingers around the warm skin. "I'm so sorry. Your poor family. Losing so much."

"Aneurysm." He lifts his eyes and studies the darkening sky. "I sometimes wonder if taking care of him so well took too much out of her. If maybe she… I don't know. It doesn't do any good to wonder, but I do know she took better care of Pop Pop than she took of herself."

A small smile steals across my face for the first time since the call. "Pop Pop?"

"What do you call your grandfather?" he asks with a smile of his own.

I swallow more of the cool liquid before going on. "They're all dead, so nothing now."

"Man, sorry to hear that."

"They lived full lives. My mom and dad just got a little bit of a late start on the family front, so my grandparents were older."

"You the only?"

"Yeah." I chuckle. "My mom always said I was spoiled rotten."

The tinkle of glass, shouts of laugher, and the faint strains of Jodeci drift from the party down to us by the water.

"I couldn't help but overhear you singing to your mother earlier," Maverick says, his voice carrying a mix of compassion and curiosity.

"Yeah, that hymn seems to calm her down."

"I read that the part of the brain that stores music, prayer, poetry, and art is the last and least affected by Alzheimer's."

"The temporal lobe?" I ask, trying to recall the things I've been learning about the brain as I've studied the disease.

"Specifically, the temporal lobe around your right ear." He reaches to touch behind my ear. "It holds all that stuff and can

sometimes remain virtually untouched throughout the disease."

His finger still rests behind my ear, and all my body's sensations convene in that one spot where he's touching me. Our eyes meet in a gaze soldered with heat and tension.

"Oh." He drops his hand. "Sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine." I force a smile. "You were… ahem… saying about the brain?"

"Yeah." He nods slowly, eyes not leaving mine. "Language is housed in the left temporal lobe behind your left ear. There are Alzheimer's patients who can no longer talk because the left temporal lobe, which stores language, has been desecrated, but they can still sing entire songs with perfect pitch and perfect recall. It affects different parts of the brain at different rates."

"That's really fascinating."

"There are documented cases of Parkinson's patients whose hands stopped shaking when certain music was played," Maverick goes on. "So the music thing makes sense with your mom. It may continue to be an effective way to soothe her when she's agitated."

"I love that." The smile feels almost foreign it's so unexpected on my face. In a moment that felt hopeless, Maverick injected hope. "I'm so glad when I find strategies or things that will help because sometimes it feels like nothing really can."

"I think we've had similar experiences," Maverick says, his voice quiet and careful as if one wrongly placed word could set off an explosion, "in that I had to watch my grandfather slip away. Like it was years, stretched out agonizingly slowly, but then my mother was ripped from us when we least expected it. I'm not sure one is better than the other. Both hurt so bad."

"I think if I got a choice," I say, huffing out a short breath, "I'd choose quick. Here today. Gone tomorrow, instead of this endless half-here that my mother's existence is becoming."

I turn to him abruptly, shame constricting my chest.

"I don't mean I want her gone," I rush to say. "The exact opposite. I want all the time I can have with her. I'll make it last as long as possible, but I don't know that *she* would want that."

"You don't have to feel weird. I knew what you meant, but what makes you think she might prefer it the other way?"

"She always seems to be going back to a time when her mama was here, or my father, or just when things were happy and simple and she had a grasp on it all."

“That’s pretty common. For them to kind of return to a time that was happy or that provided some routine, predictability.”

“She always wants to go to her shop.” I offer a sad smile. “Her old bakery. She’d go there every day if we’d let her. She wants to make the cupcakes and the free cookies she’d always have for kids who came in after school.”

He looks at me, but there’s a faraway quality to his eyes, darkened with memory and maybe a touch of sadness.

“It was the bus for Pop Pop,” he offers after a few seconds, grinning into his drink before taking a swig. “He used to drive a school bus. Every day at seven in the morning and three o’clock in the afternoon, he’d put on his coat and hat and head for the door.”

“Seriously?” Even though I know firsthand how difficult patterns like that can be, the fact that Maverick is smiling gives me permission to. “What’d you guys do?”

“At first we kept trying to tell him *you don’t drive the bus anymore. No one is waiting for you*, but that just seemed to devastate him. A man who had always had people depending on him, needing him, to hear that no one did anymore.”

“You’re a real downer, you know that?” I ask, bumping his shoulder with mine.

“I guess that did sound pretty sad, huh?” He glances over at me, a hint of a curve to his lips. “We stopped trying to reason with him and eventually just took all the clocks out of the house so he wouldn’t know when it was seven or three. Worked most days.”

I can’t help but think of the hymns I sing and all the small things Aunt Geneva and I do to help Mama navigate the present when the past calls to her so strongly. Maverick and I are like soldiers trading war stories, only his battles are behind him. I’m still in the trenches. In many ways, just getting started.

“She has really good days where it’s like she’s herself,” I tell him, “but then in a matter of hours, she’s paranoid or agitated or terrified. It’s not a line her brain is drawing from here to the end. It zigzags. More like a maze, and half the time I feel like I’m lost in there with her.”

“Hey.” He touches my shoulder, prompting me to tear my gaze away from the gorgeous bay and look at him. “I know we just met, but I don’t believe in chance.”

“Aren’t you the betting app guy?” I teasingly scoff. “How can you not believe in chance?”

“I don’t believe in wasted meetings. Maybe that’s a better way to say it. Basically, this, with your mom, it’s not something people understand unless they’ve lived it. I’ve lived it. This may sound weird since we just met, but if you ever need someone to talk to…”

I don’t answer, but simply search his face. There’s no sign of subterfuge, ulterior motive, or creepy cheater boyfriend vibes, so after a beat, I nod. “Thanks. I might.”

The wall of politeness typically standing between you and a stranger isn’t there with Maverick. Our shared experience, the loss he understands when so few do, barreled through that barrier. And I don’t know him or even know him enough to trust him, but I do see him. And I feel like he sees me. That’s more than you can ask from most people you’ve known for years. We so rarely truly see people in their hurt. It’s even rarer not to flinch—not to look away from another’s pain.

“Mav!”

We both turn toward his name being called. Zere and Chapel are picking their way down the grassy hill wearing spindly summer sandals.

“Babe,” Zere huffs, and I’m not sure if she’s out of breath or patience. “I’ve been looking for you. It’s time for the fireworks. We need to go do the toast.”

“Sure.” He knocks back the last of his drink, dangling the empty glass from one hand and slipping the other hand into the pocket of his well-cut slacks. “Can’t say I’m sorry this is almost over.”

Something that looks like hurt pinches Zere’s pretty face.

“Shit.” He takes her hand and holds her eyes with his. “I meant the party, Zee. The party.”

“Right.” She paints on a bright smile that she spreads between Chapel and me. “Well, ladies, come on. We’re watching the fireworks from the other pier. You don’t want to miss it.”

They walk slightly ahead of us, hand in hand. Chapel and I seem to by tacit agreement fall far enough behind that we can’t hear their conversation. Something is off between them and has been all night, but who am I to question their relationship? Every couple has an off night or a rough patch.

“You sure you’re okay?” Chapel asks, linking her elbow through mine. “I could tell the call really upset you.”

“I’ll be fine.” I sigh, continuing down the pier and giving her arm a squeeze. “It just catches me off guard sometimes, this new

reality."

"I get it. I mean, I'm not sure I can totally understand what you're going through, but I can imagine."

My gaze drifts to Maverick standing beside Zere at the edge of the pier, a relaxed smile on his face as he lets her do the talking and the toasting. He gets it. If no one else at this party gets what I'm going through, he does.

The fireworks explode and whistle across the horizon. We raise our glasses to toast the sky, a vibrant star-filled dome of color and spark. It's a chaos of sound and sight that sets the world above us on rainbow fire.

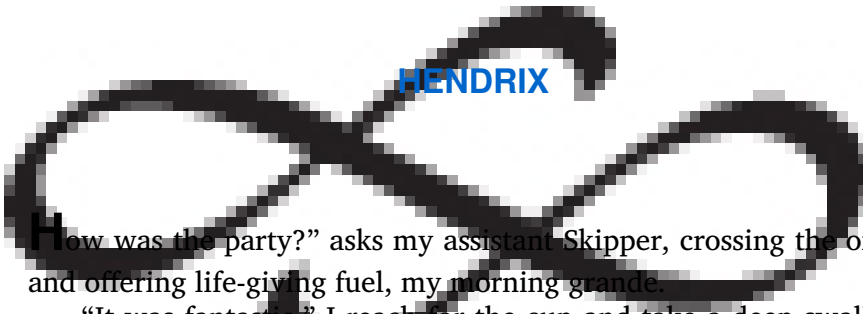
And I was wrong. This isn't useless. It somehow lifts my spirits, the fireworks streaking through the moon-split clouds and soaring as if striving for outer space. Neon confetti flares in the night sky, brilliant colors mirrored on the glassy water. Beauty like this is enough just for its own sake.

When I drop my eyes from the spectacle overhead I meet Maverick's considering stare. He almost seems to silently ask if I'm okay, if I'm better now. I smile and raise my glass to him, allowing the warmth of his answering grin to thaw out those last few corners that froze inside when I talked to my mother. The petrified places that always leave me shivering and uncertain.

As I look from him back to the electric night, I can't help but think that maybe beauty's never wasted and maybe Maverick's right.

Nothing ever happens by chance.

CHAPTER 6



HENDRIX

"How was the party?" asks my assistant Skipper, crossing the office and offering life-giving fuel, my morning grande.

"It was fantastic." I reach for the cup and take a deep swallow. "Mmmmm, that's good. Thank you."

"You know I got you."

And she always does. I met Skipper at a job fair in the AUC. She's one of the rare folks actually born and raised here in Atlanta. East Point, to be specific.

At whiplash speed, she can swing from the polished executive assistant with her Clark Atlanta University business degree, to your guide on everything from the finest African braiders in a twenty-mile radius to the city's best oxtails.

"So tell me everything." Skipper plops into the seat across from my desk, avid curiosity lighting her blue-gray eyes. Golden-brown locs fall past her shoulders and she crosses one leg over the other, settling in for any gossip from the party that kicked off the summer.

I glance from the iPad on my desk, its screen crowded with a bulging to-do list, to my assistant and sigh. She won't stop bugging me unless I give her some good intel.

"Five minutes." I hold up my palm and spread my fingers. "That's all I can afford. I got too much to catch up on."

"Five minutes. Startinnnnnnng…" She consults her invisible pretend wristwatch. "Now!"

"What do you want to know?" I sit back in my chair, relaxing into the buttery leather cushions.

"Who'd you see?" Skipper leans forward and rushes on before I

have a chance to respond. “I mean I’ve seen all the pics on social media, but who did you *see*? Who’d you meet personally?”

I scroll through my memory for all the celebrities I met and share the ones I know will make her gasp and scream.

“Oh, my God!” She squeals and covers her mouth with one talon nail–tipped hand. “Grip performed? If you get invited back next year, I’m going as your purse. You’ll just have to carry me around.”

We share a laugh over that ridiculous notion and I take another sip of coffee, hoping it will wake me more. I flew back to Atlanta late last night. If I didn’t have so much work to do, I would have stayed home to recover from the Miami shenanigans. The after-party Chapel dragged me to involved strippers, hard liquor, and… mud? All those mojitos ate my recollections of what happened when we left Zere’s house.

“Is their place as gorgeous as it looked in *Architectural Digest*?” Skipper asks.

“Yeah, they have a beautiful home.”

I pause with the cup halfway to my lips and allow myself to remember the conversation with Maverick. Now *that* I recall with crystal clarity.

“I wonder if they’ll keep it,” Skipper says, reaching across my desk to grab one of the Godiva chocolates never far from reach.

“What do you mean?” I dial back into the conversation. Did I miss something? “Why would they get rid of a mansion on Biscayne Bay? That’s some of the most coveted real estate in the country.”

“I meant now that they aren’t together anymore.” Skipper unwraps the candy. “He is a billionaire, though, after selling that app. I assume the house is in his name and I guess it’s not like an actual divorce where they split everything. They weren’t married, but that house just kind of became synonymous with their relationship because of how big a deal that party is. I hope—”

“Not together?” I cut into Skipper’s one-breath tirade. “What do you mean? I was just at their party, and they were very much together.”

Skipper stops mid-chew of her chocolate, a feral gleam in her eye only juicy gossip could inspire. “You haven’t heard?”

She doesn’t wait for my response but reaches into the pocket of her skirt for her phone. After a few clicks and swipes, she zips around my desk and drops the phone in front of me. She leans over

my shoulder to read her screen.

"It's quits for the model and the mogul."

My jaw drops, and the headline on Black Business, a popular entertainment site, is a hook in my open mouth, pulling me in.

Reality television star Zere O'Malley and her longtime boyfriend Maverick Bell released a joint statement announcing their split after three years of dating.

"We go our separate ways as friends who deeply respect each other. The time we've had together has meant so much to us both. This is an amicable situation and a decision we've reached mutually. We ask for privacy as we move forward with the next chapter of our lives."

I reread the statement again and again, but the words don't compute.

Can't say I'm sorry this is almost over.

The hurt on Zere's face when Maverick said that. His rush to reassure her. Looking back, knowing this, it all makes sense. I felt more than once that something seemed off between them. My Spidey senses must have been correct. They usually are.

"Sounds like they did the ol' united-front thing for the party," Skipper says, resting her ample bottom on my desk and facing me, "but had this all planned before Saturday. That's what everyone's saying online, but no one saw it coming."

"He struck me as a very private man."

Except for the fact he told me some really personal shit within minutes of meeting me. That was, I know certain, out of character.

"He definitely is," Skipper agrees. "But she isn't. I mean, everyone said they were a mismatch in a lot of ways from the beginning. Obviously she's drop-dead gorgeous, and he's rich as hell."

Something itches under my skin at hearing Maverick reduced to his net worth. Sure, Zere is one of the most beautiful women in the world, but that man… well, anyone would be lucky to have him. He's fine, yes, but so much more. I learned that in the limited time I spent with him. He's smart and funny and compassionate. And has a quiet, compelling quality that tunes a room in to his frequency. I've met a lot of rich men, but I've never met anyone like him.

"Hen." Skipper snaps her fingers in my face, studying me with a curious expression. "Did you hear me?"

"Sorry." I blink and shake my head, hoping to scatter the

lingering cobwebs in my brain. “What’d you say?”

“I said you have a Zoom scheduled with Zere this morning about the show.” Skipper grabs my iPad and scrolls down. “Right before lunch with the Aspire team. And after lunch you have a call with that magazine that wants to do the spread on Chapel.”

I dispel thoughts of Zere and Maverick. I got too much business of my own to be minding theirs. I sink back into my chair with a sigh. “Why’d you let me load up the schedule like this my first day back?”

“Let you?” Skipper shakes her head, jangling her earrings with a dozen charms. “Who is ever letting you do things? *I* said you should take Monday off and you vetoed that idea.”

“Next time, remind me of this moment.”

“I’ll try.” Skipper stands and crosses back around the desk. She doesn’t break stride, but heads for the door. “I’ll be back.”

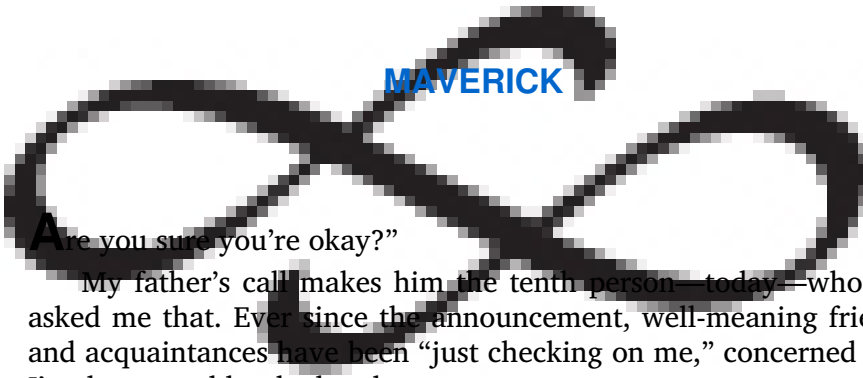
“Where you going?”

“I know you well, and with a day like this…” She pauses in the door leading to the reception area and laughs over her shoulder. “You’re gonna need more coffee.”

I raise my cup and drain the last few drops of my morning brew before looking at the iPad, the screen overwhelmed with color-coded appointments.

“Damn right I will.”

CHAPTER 7



MAVERICK

"Are you sure you're okay?"

My father's call makes him the tenth person—today—who has asked me that. Ever since the announcement, well-meaning friends and acquaintances have been "just checking on me," concerned that I'm devastated by the breakup.

And I am in a way. I'm sorry it ended like this, but I'm also ready to move on and forward.

"Pop, I'm good." I lean on my bedroom's balcony railing and consider the tumultuous ocean that is my backyard here in Malibu. "I'll always care about Zee, but you know we wanted different things."

"Not like I wouldn't want more grandkids," he grouses from the other end of the line.

"You and Mom shouldn't have put all your bets on me." I chuckle and draw in a lungful of ocean air. "I do have like twelve cousins. They got kids and half of 'em consider you a second grandfather."

"I know. I don't really care about that. I just want you happy, Mav. I thought Zere might be the one who could get you to settle down."

"I did settle down for three whole years. We shared our lives. We were together and now we're not. Not everybody gets a soulmate for life like you and Mom."

"So you don't want to get married? Don't want any more kids?"

"I was a father by the time I was twenty-two, and Tamia just graduated from high school. Why would I want to start all over for

another eighteen years now?"

"And marriage?"

"I loved Zere, but it wasn't like that with us. If I'd had with her what you had with Mom, this would be a very different conversation."

"I know that," he says, his tone subdued, bordering on despairing. "I'm still living that hell, and it's been three years since I lost your mother. Not sure it will ever hurt less."

I often wonder if I hadn't met Zere so soon after my mother died, would we have lasted as long as we did? I was vulnerable and needed a distraction. Needed companionship. A friend. Zere was all that, and I'll always appreciate it. My father and I were both so steeped in sorrow. I found something… someone to shift my focus to. Pop didn't have that. I didn't mean to remind him of that time. Though, who am I kidding? If a man's heart is carved out of his chest, do you have to remind him he's missing a vital organ?

"You still seeing the grief counselor?" I venture, kicking myself for steering the conversation in this direction. It's not that we never talk about my mom dying, but grief is a wave, washing in and washing out. Sometimes calm, and others a riptide. I've seen it take my dad under before.

"Occasionally." He grunts. "What they gon' do for me? Can't bring Priscilla back. I do appreciate a place to talk, perspective, all that. It's not useless. It just doesn't change the fact that the person I loved more than anything is gone."

My family has grieved a lot over the last few years. It was slow with my grandfather, losing bits of him along the way until one day he was gone completely. There was admittedly some relief with his passing. Relief for my grandfather, who would never have chosen the existence Alzheimer's left him with, and for my mother, who absorbed the brunt of his care. Losing my mother was different. Like a thread ripped from a quilt that instantly unravels. She held our family together, and for a while my father and I both floundered. My therapist suggested I find something to focus on; a goal. You ain't gotta tell me twice. If there's one thing I love, it's something to accomplish.

"Did I tell you how close we are to sealing the deal with the Vipers?" I ask him, deliberately pivoting from the conversation's sad direction.

"You lying." Pop's voice immediately brightens, and even

though I can't see him, in my mind's eye, he leans forward with a familiar eagerness only basketball elicits.

"Yeah. If all goes well, I'll have a controlling interest, but AJ will maintain a minority ownership and his seat on the board of directors. He wouldn't budge on those conditions."

"Too bad you still have to work with him," Dad grumbles. "He's an asshole. His daddy was an asshole."

"I wish Andrew Senior were still around to see them lose this team," I say, flecks of bitterness in the words.

"Andy Senior wasn't my favorite person, but it was Jerry Keys who blackballed me." The annoyance in Pop's voice reaches through the phone. "That motherfucker blocked me at every turn."

"Had they hired you as the Vipers' head coach, they'd have at least one championship. Everybody knows that and no one ever did anything about it."

"Just my luck my archrival became one of the most powerful men in the league." I can almost hear my father's shrug of resignation. "Jerry was one of the commissioner's closest advisers, and he always made it clear that anyone who helped me would be on his shit list."

My teeth clench at the memory of Pop being passed over time and again, job after job that he was qualified for, but never hired. Stuck as an assistant, but never given the chance to lead a team. I can't get those years back, can't make it right, but I can make him feel better. Not just about the blocked ambitions in his coaching career, but maybe ease some of the loss and grief he hasn't been able to release. I hope having this deal to focus on and then the endeavor of helping to shape the team will help.

"If I could get rid of AJ altogether, believe me I would," I tell Pop. "But this has been his family's team for so long. He's for damn sure not letting it go."

"Andy Senior would roll over in his grave," my father chuckles. "A Black man owning his family's team? Unbelievable."

"I still can't quite believe it myself, that I can actually pull this off."

"Why you surprised? All you've accomplished, the money you got when you sold True Playahs, and you didn't think you could buy the Vipers?"

"This shit is not just money. Some things you can't even buy your way into. You and I know owning a professional team is often

one of them."

"When you have the capital and they don't, things change. They need the investment."

"They also need the leadership," I say. "I hope you'll help us with that."

My father releases a sigh. "I'm an old man. What do I know anymore?"

"Pop, you're sixty years old. Younger than half the men running things and owning teams in this league. And all my life I've heard you complaining the Vipers' front office couldn't lead a fly to a pile of shit."

His laughter booms over the phone, drawing a smile from me in reply. "Ain't that the truth, though? Okay. You buy your team, and we'll see."

"I'm working on it."

A noise at the door distracts me. I turn to grin at my assistant standing there with his iPad, obviously ready to work.

"Pop, I gotta go," I tell him, closing the door to the balcony and walking past Bolt out into the hall. He follows, our quiet footfalls the only sound in the house. "Bolt's here to make me do some work."

"Tell that assistant of yours to take it easy on you," Pop laughs.

I glance over my shoulder, and Bolt is hot on my heels, a stern look on his face like we're about to get down to some real business.

"Not a chance," I say. "He's ready to get started. You know how he is."

"Well, I'll let you go…" Pop pauses. "You sure you're—"

"I'm okay." It's a struggle to keep the irritation out of my voice. I know he's concerned, but he really doesn't need to be. I've had weeks to get used to the breakup with Zere. The rest of the world is still catching up. "Gotta go. Love you."

"Love you, too, and… well, I guess you can keep me in the loop on the Vipers thing."

A triumphant grin takes over my face. "I'll do that. Bye, Pop."

I've arrived in the kitchen by the time we disconnect. Laurenz, my chef, has left my morning smoothie on the pristine expanse of marble countertop.

"Need this," I groan, grabbing the frosted glass and sitting on a stool at the counter.

"Gulp," Bolt orders, frowning. "You have a Zoom in thirty

minutes and still need to shower and change, I presume."

"What's wrong with what I got on?" I ask, gesturing to the wetsuit peeled down around my waist to reveal my arms and torso still slightly damp from the ocean.

"I think the board will expect less…" He runs assessing eyes up and down my frame. "Less chest and more clothes."

"They want my money, not the other way around," I say, unable to suppress my cynicism. "I'm sure they'd make allowances."

"You're probably right."

His lips twitch, reminding me that I hired him not only for his brilliant mind, but for the fact that he, despite first impressions, knows how to laugh. He knows when to work and when to ease up and make sure I blow off steam. He's my assistant, but he's probably the most essential person on my team. I stole him from a company I was considering buying. I didn't buy the company, but I did hire Roy Sires. Bolt to his friends, so named because he's such a fast runner. That speed earned him a track scholarship to Harvard and could've taken him to the Olympics had it not been for a torn ACL.

I gulp the smoothie obediently, rinse the glass, and place it in the dishwasher. My housekeeper doesn't expect me to clean up after myself, but my mama did, and it's a hard habit to break.

"Lemme make myself respectable," I say, exiting the kitchen. "I'll meet you in the office in fifteen minutes."

"The Realtor called," Bolt says, standing in the living room, eyes glued to his iPad. "We already have a bite on the Miami property."

That stops me at the foot of the stairs. Selling the house Zere loved so much, even more than today's announcement, feels like the final call on our relationship.

"Did you hear me?" Bolt glances up. He's not a tall man, standing at around five foot seven, but he is powerfully built, and his body always gives him away. Jaw clenched when he's annoyed. Shoulders tensing when he's angry. Brows knitted when he's concerned, as they are now. "Are you having second thoughts?"

"About selling the house?" I ask, one foot poised on the bottom step.

"I guess about…" He gestures vaguely with the iPad. "About everything. About the breakup?"

"No," I answer without hesitation. "Zee and I don't belong

together. I'm wondering if I should offer her the house instead of selling it."

"Sir, that's millions of dollars. Maybe a bracelet or a bag or… something that isn't eight figures would be a better parting gift."

I laugh outright at his incredulous expression. "Cheaper for sure. Just hold off till I have the chance to discuss it with Zere."

His lips purse in exasperation, but he lets it go. "Will do. And Ralph called this morning. Said you told him to reach out after the party."

I start up the stairs and roll my eyes. "He was all up in my grill Saturday night. No rush to get back to him. Always somebody trying to get in my pockets."

He was the exact opposite of Hendrix, who seemed almost reluctant to pursue the idea of me investing in her venture capital fund. A smile quirks my lips at the memory of her leading the electric slide, head thrown back, laughter floating over the crowd. A stark contrast to how upset she was not even an hour later after the call with her mother.

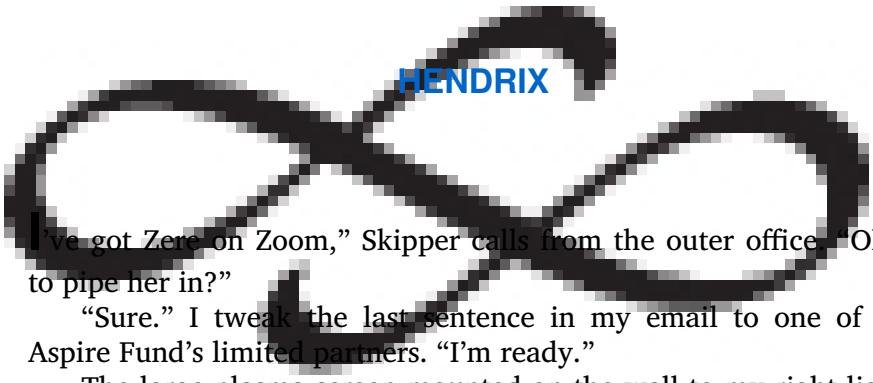
This isn't the first time I've thought of her since the party. She's vibrant and smart and bold and… soft. There's a softness to her that's easy to overlook because of all that strength. I can't get that bright smile and smooth brown skin out of my mind. Keep hearing her voice singing that hymn as she tried to soothe her mom.

It's much too soon to consider asking her out. That's ridiculous. I'm just ending a long-term relationship. And she's Zere's production partner. I'm not ready for another relationship right now, much less one that would be that complicated and wrong on so many levels.

Still I don't stop myself from uttering the next words as I climb the stairs toward my bedroom.

"Hey, Bolt, find out all you can about the Aspire Fund out of Atlanta."

CHAPTER 8



HENDRIX

"I've got Zere on Zoom," Skipper calls from the outer office. "Okay to pipe her in?"

"Sure." I tweak the last sentence in my email to one of the Aspire Fund's limited partners. "I'm ready."

The large plasma screen mounted on the wall to my right lights up with Zere's face. I know her well enough by now that the stunning smile doesn't completely disguise the new sadness in her eyes.

"Morning, partner," she says, tucking one long copper strand of hair behind her ear. "Have you recovered from Saturday night?"

"You could say that." I swing my chair around to face the screen and stretch my back dramatically. "But this forty-year-old booty don't twerk like it used to. I think I dislocated something popping on that last set."

She laughs and I'm glad to see it chases away some of the sadness even if only for a moment. "Girl, same."

"You're forty?" I ask, lifting my brows.

"My next birthday." She slides her gaze away. "It's gonna be a tough one."

"Forty's not bad. Actually I'm having the time of my life. My career is on fire. I know myself better than I ever have. In my twenties, I was just running. Always in the streets and for what? In my thirties, I started asking big questions and looking for answers. Now I know exactly who I am and what I want. *And* I can finally afford myself."

We both laugh, but the humor dwindles on her face quickly.

“What about kids? A husband? Do you start to worry that maybe you won’t ever have those things?”

“One of them I don’t want,” I reply. “Childless by choice over here.”

“You really don’t want kids?” The shock on her face doesn’t surprise me. I’m used to it. Why is it so hard to believe there are women in the world who don’t want to act as host for a human who may never fully appreciate their sacrifices, drains their hard-earned money, and forces them to make the difficult choices that men, even as fathers, never seem to face?

“I really don’t.” I shrug. “Kids aren’t for everyone. Society tells us that, and there are a lot of abused, neglected, unloved kids in the world because women caved to antiquated gendered expectations. I like my life.”

“And what about companionship? A husband?”

“I have the best friends in the world for companionship and I get dick whenever I want it.”

She sputters a laugh and shakes her head. “I’ve had plenty of dick. I want a baby.”

“Then have one.”

“You make it sound easy.”

I don’t insult her by saying these days it can be, that she could adopt on her own. Surrogacy. All kinds of ways to become a mom. I know what I want and respect her enough to believe she knows what she wants, too.

“Look, my best friends both have kids and wouldn’t trade them for the world.” I swing back and forth in my chair and tip back. “I see why it works for them, but I also see very clearly why it wouldn’t work for me. Besides, I love being the rich auntie who gets to go home to my nice, quiet expensive apartment after spoiling *their* kids.”

“I come from a big family and have been the rich auntie for a long time,” she says with a wry smile. “I thought maybe that would be enough, but the closer I got to forty, the more I realized that for me, a family is essential.”

She glances down at the slim hands folded on her glass desk. “I thought I could have that with Maverick.”

“I was sorry to hear about the breakup,” I say, forcing myself not to look away from the raw pain on her face. No need to pretend I don’t know what the whole world seems to be talking about today

on every gossip site and social media post.

"You read the announcement, huh?" She huffs out a bitter breath. "'Mutual' my ass. If there's one man I knew would be the best father to my children and a wonderful husband, it was Maverick Bell. I knew that from the beginning. I would never have given that up, but he left me no choice."

"Did he…" She's going *there*, but I'm not sure how personal we should get. How much I should probe. "What happened?"

"He doesn't want kids." She rolls her eyes. "Correction. Any *more* kids. His daughter, Tamia, just graduated from high school, and he doesn't want to start over with a new family at his age."

I don't reply because it sounds completely reasonable to me, but that's the last thing Zere wants to hear.

"He did tell me from the beginning," Zere admits, her eyes unfocused and filling with tears. "I knew, but there was this little voice in the back of my head that said I could change his mind. That he'd love me enough to choose me over…"

Over his own happiness?

I don't say it aloud and neither does she, but it's loud in the room. Is that love? Expecting him to become someone else for you? Forgo what that person knows will make them happy to be with you? Is that trade ever even?

"Well, enough about my love life." Zere carefully swipes a rogue tear under her eye. "Or the recent lack thereof. Let's talk about Chapel's show."

"Right." I blow out a breath of relief, glad we're changing the subject. "I'm ready to do this and so glad you see the same potential in her that I do."

"As soon as she stepped on set, I saw what she could be. Her winning the contest just confirmed what I already knew. She's a star."

"She is indeed," I agree.

"You've got a great eye for talent, Hendrix, and you're a hustler." Her eyes soften, and her expression looks lighter for the first time since the video call began. "We're gonna do great things together."

"I think so, too," I reply with a smile. I clap my hands once. "Where do we start?"

The call, scheduled for thirty minutes, goes an hour. We both have so many ideas we end up brainstorming several approaches.

We hang up and I barely have time to look over the list of contacts we prioritized before it's time to leave for lunch with my Aspire team.

"Sorry I'm late," I tell them when I rush into Paschal's. "Got caught up in my last meeting."

"Girl, you fine," Nelly Brewer assures me, proffering her cheek for a kiss. "Sit down and take a deep breath."

I am rather breathless. In addition to losing track of time, I got caught in some of Atlanta's random-ass traffic in the middle of the day, which only stressed me more.

"You're actually just in time." My other partner, Kashawn Phillips, gestures to the table where a basket of corn muffins takes center stage alongside an order of voodoo shrimp to start us off.

"Now y'all know I'm trying to eat fewer fried foods," I say, reaching for the battered shrimp. "Diabetes runs in my family and I do not need it running over here."

"I got you, girl," Nelly says. "Veggies. Fried green tomatoes."

We laugh and I tell the server I'm fine with water.

"How are the kids?" I ask them both, pinging a look between the two of them.

"Giving me as much grief as I gave my mama." Kashawn massages her temples. "Meryl decided she doesn't want to go to college. Every step this child has taken since she was like five years old was toward an Ivy League education. We didn't impose that on her. She wanted it, and now all of a sudden she's gonna do what? Travel the world and post about it on social media?"

"Hey, don't knock it," I say. "My friend Yasmen's daughter Deja will probably make more money as a hair influencer than most of the people in her class who go to college for a conventional degree. And you already know Soledad is getting that bag."

"She has you to thank for that," Kashawn says, reaching for another shrimp.

"I simply connected her with some brands looking for the kind of content she produces," I say. "Soledad is a domestic beast. I love seeing one of my best friends flourish."

I sip my water and nod toward Nelly. "And what about Gabriella?"

"Finally sleeping through the night." She lifts her hands in hallelujah. "That's what I get for marrying a woman half my age who wanted babies."

“Beth’s not half your age,” I laugh. “She’s only ten years younger, and you know you love that baby more than life itself.”

“You right,” Nelly concedes. “But I didn’t see myself starting a family at fifty.”

She reaches into her purse and fishes out a pink mini fan, plopping it onto the table and turning it on to oscillate over her face.

“I’m literally in menopause,” Nelly mock sobs. “When they say it’s like fire shut up in your bones, I bet they meant hot flashes. Lemme tell you. Changing diapers while having hot flashes is not it. Why’d y’all let me do this mom thing this late?”

“You know you’d do it again for Beth,” I tell her. “Like come on, you’re so gone for that woman.”

“What we won’t do for love.” Kashawn sighs dreamily.

“Whatever,” Nelly grumbles, but she can’t hide the smile that creeps over her face or the sheer joy in her eyes every time she talks about Beth and the baby.

I can’t help but think of my earlier conversation with Zere.

“You’re happy, though, right?” I ask. “No regrets?”

“None,” Nelly replies without hesitation and pulls the fan closer to her face. “Ecstatic. I can’t imagine life without that lil’ stink bomb now.”

We order our food and get down to business while we wait for it to arrive. I never would have imagined I’d be in the venture capital space, but when Nelly, my soror and mentor, approached me about getting Aspire off the ground to help Black women entrepreneurs, it was an immediate yes.

“I hope we have a superstar founder in our second round like we did in the first,” Nelly says.

“Hue has surpassed every expectation,” I agree.

The fledgling cosmetic company’s hero product is a foundation designed for women of color. Lots of companies have been doing that lately, but this product uses AI to customize the absolute perfect match for your skin. It’s been getting massive media coverage and the sales to go with it.

“I have a feeling this’ll be our first unicorn,” Nelly says with a gleam of pride in her eyes.

A unicorn investment valued at a billion dollars is indeed rare, especially in the first round for a small fund like ours.

“We really need to play it up to potential limited partners,”

Kashawn says. “Speaking of, anyone new we need to be pitching? Talking to?”

Maverick Bell flashes in my mind. He expressed some interest, but who knows if he was even serious. Maybe he’d had a few drinks by then. There was a literal line of people at the bar waiting to speak to him. He probably got pitched so many times that night, he won’t even remember our conversation.

Meanwhile I have replayed the brief exchange in my head several times. Not a sexy-flirty-I-wonder-if-I’ll-take-you-home kind of thing. I felt connected to him in a way that I haven’t with anyone else, specifically around Mama’s condition. Even in the midst of wall-to-wall partygoers, with music blasting and liquor flowing freely all around, he saw me. Recognized there was a part of me completely removed from that scene and anxious about my mother.

I remain quiet and fork Paschal’s famous greens into my mouth. If I breathed a word of Maverick Bell’s interest, my partners would pounce on it and force me to follow up. I can’t call that man. First of all, he was probably talking out the side of his neck. Making conversation. But even as I think it, I know the thoughtful man who shared his experience with his grandfather isn’t that cavalier.

My second reason for not wanting to reach out…

The memory of Zere’s pain this morning clamps down on even the thought that was forming. I can’t reach out to Maverick. Ever. That’s it. That’s all. End of story.

“I think we should host a showcase,” Nelly says. “Bring our best-performing round-one founders in along with prospective limited partners, and even those who have already committed. Leverage the success of round one to raise money for round two. We want to cast vision and make these rich folks feel comfortable trusting us with their money.”

“And we could have Hannah from Hue share how well things are going,” I add. “Her revenue is already bonkers. It’s an incredible return for her investors and a great track record for our fund.”

“Let’s do it.” Kashawn gulps down the last of her sweet tea. “My assistant can help organize it. She’ll call your offices to get the ball rolling.”

“I’m gonna order some of that 1947 chicken for Beth to go,” Nelly says. “She’s home with the baby. That’ll be a treat.”

“How’s she adjusting to not working?” I ask.

“It’s harder than she thought it would be,” Nelly says. “There’s

a touch of postpartum. She may go back to work in a year or so, but right now, she just wants to focus completely on Gabby."

"And is the firm being understanding about it?" Kashawn asks.

"Well, they say they are, but she was close to making partner when she got pregnant." Nelly shrugs. "We all know the circus don't stop for one mama."

"Isn't the saying the circus don't stop for one monkey?" Kashawn laughs.

"Like I'm gon' call the mother of my child a monkey." Nelly sucks her teeth. "Shiiiit. Lemme get this chicken before she comes to her senses and realizes I don't deserve her."

Once we all have our to-go boxes, I reach for the bill, not surprised to find myself in a three-way tug-of-war with them to pay.

"It's my turn, heifers," I fake growl. "Y'all not gon' block my blessings by not letting me pay."

"There's the church girl we know and love," Nelly teases.

A breezy laugh slips past my lips. "We all know I'm far from the church girl. That's my mama and Aunt Geneva."

Some of the humor leaves their expressions, replaced by concern.

"How's Mama Betty doing?" Kashawn queries.

Kashawn's known my mother since college when Mama would visit me on campus at Georgia State. We were both on scholarship at a PWI trying to figure shit out in a space that seemed to at times only tolerate us. We experienced how being one of the few can drive you into the solace and safety of your community. I needed that level of support and acceptance for my survival.

"She's fine." I offer the folder with the bill and my card to the server. "You know how it is. I think she's holding steady right now."

No need to go into the latest drama from Saturday night. It was no worse than it's been before with Mama. I'm simply still coming to terms with it not getting any better.

We walk to the parking lot and I head toward my Mercedes G wagon. Kashawn sashays to her BMW and Nelly unlocks her Range Rover. Atlanta really is that city where Black affluence thrives. We named our fund Aspire to reflect the hopes of our founders, but also the spirit of this city that has been an incubator for Black strivers and hustlers for decades.

I'm sleepy and heavy lidded, trying to shake off the itis when I get back to the office.

“Who loves you?” I ask Skipper, placing a small Styrofoam to-go container on her desk, which she opens with a squeal.

“Ooooh! Sweet potato cake from Paschal’s.” She does a little shimmy in her seat and licks frosting from the side of the dessert. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome,” I chuckle. “Oh, and could you send some flowers to Nelly’s wife?”

“Special occasion?”

“Special person.” I turn on my heel and head into my office. “Hold all my calls. I need to get through some of this work before that three o’clock with *Paste*.”

“Sure thing, boss,” she says around a hunk of cake.

I haven’t been back at my desk for more than three minutes when Skipper pokes her head through the door.

“Yes?” I ask, clinging to my patience.

“There’s a call for you,” she says, her eyes stretched wide.

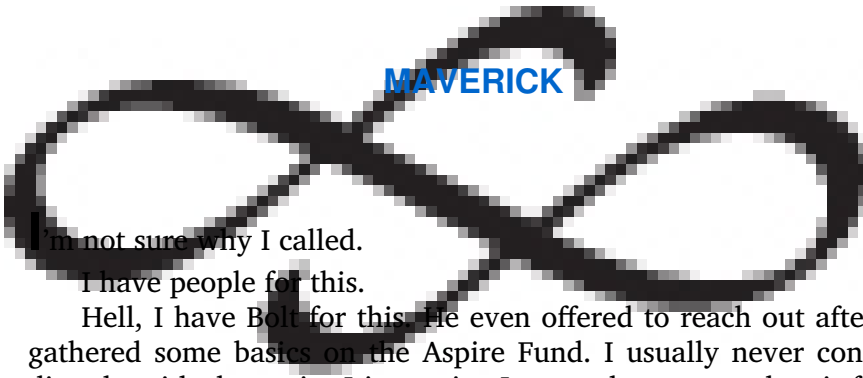
“Did I not just say hold all calls?” I drop my head into my hands. “It better be important for you to interrupt when I’m trying to make some progress here.”

“It’s very important,” Skipper says on a rush of breath. “I mean, *he’s* very important.”

I lift my head slowly to meet her eyes, a frown gathering on my face. “Who is on the phone?”

“Oh, no one.” Skipper gulps and grins. “Just Maverick Bell.”

CHAPTER 9



MAVERICK

I'm not sure why I called.

I have people for this.

Hell, I have Bolt for this. He even offered to reach out after he gathered some basics on the Aspire Fund. I usually never connect directly with the entity I invest in. Just send money and wait for it to come back to me with a return. I don't know that I want to be involved yet with the Aspire Fund, but I do know that I wanted to speak to Hendrix again.

Am I the asshole for reaching out to her the day my breakup with Zere was announced? Probably. I'm not… pursuing anything. I don't know Hendrix well enough for that. After three years with one person, I'm not even sure that I want anything with anyone right now.

But Hendrix intrigues me, and as jaded as it sounds, not many people do these days.

"Mr. Bell?" That deep, molasses-rich voice I remember from the party pours over the speaker and fills my office when Hendrix's assistant patches her through.

"Hendrix, hi." I turn away from my home office view, a stretch of Malibu beach, and fold my arms on the desk. "Thanks for taking my call."

"Of course." She clears her throat. "How can I help you?"

A grin cocks one corner of my mouth at her formal tone. I've already seen this woman turn a party out and cry in the matter of an hour. Not to mention the commiseration we offered each other down at the dock. I think we've skipped formal, but given the

circumstances and her relationship with Zere, I understand the space she's trying to insert here.

"I was hoping I could help you," I reply. "Or at least your fund. Maybe. I've been looking for new opportunities."

"Oh, sure. Well, like I said, the Aspire Fund focuses on supporting Black women entrepreneurs. As I'm sure you know, women make up less than two percent of all venture capital funding, and Black women less than half a percent."

"And yet Black women statistically have some of the highest returning, most successful ventures," I say, leaning back in my chair.

There's a small silence from her end before she speaks again. "Yeah, that's right."

"I read that you and two friends there in Atlanta started the fund."

"Yes, two of my sorority sisters, Kashawn Phillips, who I met in undergrad at Georgia State, and Nelly Brewer, who became kind of a mentor years ago when I was first starting out."

"Divine Nine is a great network," I say.

"Are you Greek?"

"Nah, I'm a college dropout. Didn't get that far."

"I didn't realize, but you seem to have done well enough for yourself." A bit of humor warms her voice. "Where'd you drop out of?"

"Caltech."

"Is that where you launched your app?"

"My girlfriend while I was there actually designed the app. She was much smarter than me."

"Really? And did she drop out, too?"

"Um, she was already an associate professor, so no."

"Whoa-ho-ho-ho," Hendrix chuckles. "Age gap. Forbidden love. You've got my attention. Do I wanna know the whole story?"

This isn't why I called, but just like on Saturday night, I find myself smiling too wide and telling her too much.

"I didn't realize she worked at the university. I got a late start in college. Took a year off to work with my dad."

"What did he do?"

"He was an assistant coach for the Vegas Vipers."

"Basketball?"

"Yeah. When it became clear I wasn't good enough to play ball

in college, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do so I worked in the organization doing whatever needed to be done. I'd gotten accepted to Caltech, but deferred. By the time I started, I was twenty years old."

"Okay, and then what happened?" she asks, a note of reluctant interest in her voice.

"I met LaTanya off campus and didn't realize she taught at the university. We got… friendly right away."

"You mean you had a one-night stand?"

"Blunt, aren't you?" I laugh, flipping over the heavy hourglass on my desk. "But yeah, that's what happened. By the time we realized I was a student there and she was faculty, it was too late. It wasn't against code or anything, unless she was my teacher, which she wasn't."

"So what happened?"

"Two things happened. We created an app and a baby. She wasn't sure she wanted to keep it, but then decided I'd make as good a father as anyone else."

"A ringing endorsement," Hendrix says with a chuckle.

"Pretty much. We really liked each other, but neither of us thought it was permanent. We'd actually already cooled things off when she found out she was pregnant. She was thirty by then and knew she wanted a kid, but wasn't sure when or if she'd ever want a husband. We were good friends who decided to raise a child together."

Hearing my words out loud I realize just how far past appropriate this conversation has gone.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to… I called about the Aspire Fund."

"I know, but now I have to hear how you turned an ill-advised affair with an older woman into a billion-dollar enterprise. Spill the tea."

"I lived in Vegas for a good part of my life since that's where my dad worked. And he was in professional sports. That combination led me naturally to a fascination with sports betting. Online betting started in the late nineties, but the technology wasn't there for an app till the early two thous. We got in on the basement. I knew the industry and LaTanya understood the technology."

"And the rest is history?"

"The rest became history," I say. "But it was a lot of luck and hard work first. So I know what it's like needing help in the earliest

stages of a business."

"So you invest in a lot of young businesses?"

"Oh, yeah. I even make investments that my advisers deem unwise, but just feel right to me. Guess that's the gambling background coming into play."

"And what have your advisers told you about Aspire?"

"Nothing yet. I haven't asked them."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe I'm asking you."

Neither of us speaks for a moment. It's the kind of quiet that percolates. It brims with tension and teasing and possibility.

"What do you want to know?" Hendrix finally asks.

"Tell me about Hue."

"Oh, you *have* been doing your research," she chuckles. "Hue was in our first round and they're doing very well."

"And if I wanted to invest?"

"How do they say it? Yesterday's price is not today's price." Her voice is teasing, but smooth with the truth of her words. "Their valuation is much higher than it was when we first started."

"The mark of a good investment. Have your people send details to my people."

"I am my people."

"Then you send it to me."

Another longer silence and then she replies. "I can do that, but if you really want to help somebody…"

"I do."

"Then I'd love for you to consider becoming an LP in fund two or even investing in some of our current portfolio companies who are still raising," she says. "Since you're a man of risk and all."

"Oh, throwing my words back in my face, huh?"

"Not in your face." Her laugh unfurls, unrushed and unbothered. "Just reminding you of what you told me. Now we do have a showcase coming up."

"A showcase?"

"A time for potential limited partners to hear from our fund one founders about their experience as we raise for the next round."

"When is the showcase?" I lean forward, and tell myself the eagerness is for the opportunity and not about seeing the woman offering it.

"It's being finalized, but it'll be here in Atlanta and soon. I

mean, if you don't mind coming here."

"Text me the details when you have them. Your assistant has my number."

She and I both know we could organize the specifics through our assistants, but we also know she doesn't want a potential investor like me to walk.

"Sure," she finally says. "As soon as the details are nailed, I'll text you."

My mouth twists into a satisfied smile like I've won this round when I shouldn't even be playing. Not with this woman. "Appreciate that."

"I have a three o'clock I need to get ready for, but thank you for following up," she says.

"Look forward to hearing more."

"Um, Mr. Bell."

"Maverick, please, since we may be doing business together."

"Yeah, Maverick, I plan to tell Zere that you might be investing. I want to avoid any misunderstandings on that front."

"Ahhhhh. I see."

"She and I are doing Chapel's show together, so I need to protect my working relationship with her and wouldn't want her to wonder about the nature of my connection to you."

"Makes sense. Not her concern anymore," I say wryly. "But I respect you being completely aboveboard. Did she tell you why we broke up?"

"She did, yeah."

"Sometimes people want different things more than they want each other. In the long run, it's best they go their separate ways."

"Makes sense," she says. "Well, I have another call and need to go, but I'll be in touch."

Once we've disconnected, I stare at my phone for a few seconds before dialing Zere.

"Mav," Zere answers on the first ring. "Hey."

"Hey." Now that I have her on the line, I'm not sure what to say as I watch the falling hourglass sands mark the seconds stretching into awkwardness. "How are you?"

"Don't do that," she whispers, strain cracking her typically cool facade. "I cannot take small talk from you right now. My office has been fielding calls about the announcement all day. I haven't left the house because I know someone will ask me about this mutual

breakup of ours and I'll…" Her voice trails off, breaks over the words she doesn't say. "Please just get to the point of why you called, Mav."

"Zee."

"The point."

"I, uh, I'm thinking of selling the Miami house."

"You're thinking of it?" She barks out a laugh. "I know you better than that. By the time you say you're *thinking about something* it means there's probably already a *for sale* sign out front."

"We had our first bite this morning," I admit. "But I know how much you love that house. I thought I'd ask if you want it."

"If I *want* it? A twelve-million-dollar house. You just want to give it to me? Like a parting gift for your mistress?"

"What? Hell, no, Zee. That's not—"

"Because I wasn't your mistress. You didn't *keep* me. Support me. I was with you because I loved you. I stayed because I saw a future for us."

"I never lied to you. I told you from the beginning I didn't want more kids, and you said you were fine with it." I frown, but gentle my voice despite the firm message. "It's not my fault you thought I would change. Thought *you* could change me. I never wanted to hurt you."

"But you did." Her words tangle with her tears. "I'm hurting so bad today and you call to offer me a house? Like some string of pearls for being your favorite fuck you're done with and want to dismiss?"

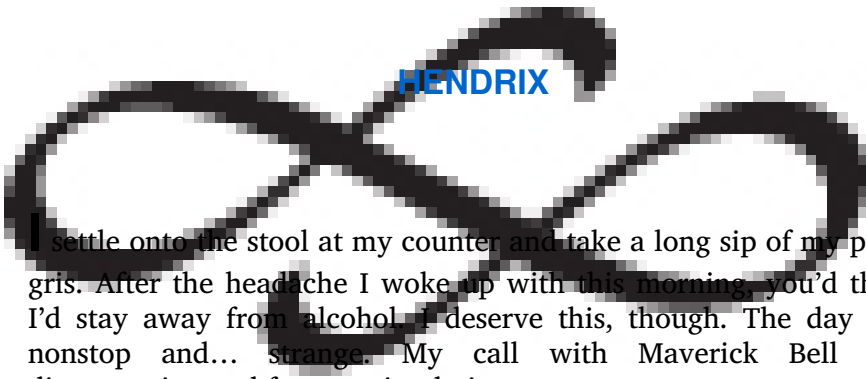
"No. It's not like that." I pinch the bridge of my nose and huff out a breath. "I didn't want you to find out I'd sold the house and not talked to you because I know you love it so much. And I would give it to you because I care about you."

"Not enough, though, right?"

To completely compromise what I want the next twenty years of my life to be? No, not enough for that.

"Zee, I'm sorry," I say after a moment. "Goodbye."

CHAPTER 10



HENDRIX

I settle onto the stool at my counter and take a long sip of my pinot gris. After the headache I woke up with this morning, you'd think I'd stay away from alcohol. I deserve this, though. The day was nonstop and… strange. My call with Maverick Bell was disconcerting and far too stimulating.

Intellectually, of course.

The man is smart and charismatic and confident. That kind of assurance goes much deeper than his pockets. It drills down to the bone. It's in his fabric, and that is some fine fabric.

I set the rest of my leftovers in the fridge. Soledad and Yasmen told me Saffron's was the best Indian food in Skyland, but I didn't want to get on a bandwagon and held out for months before I finally tried it tonight. I bring up our text thread to admit defeat.

Me: You bitches were right. Saffron's is great.

Soledad: God, I love being right.

Yasmen: Aw, man. I wanted to be there when you had it for the first time.

Soledad: Just be glad she finally tried it. You know how contrary she is. She won't do things just because we told her to.

Me: That's not true.

Yasmen: It actually is. When do we get to hear about the wild weekend in Miami?

Me: It wasn't that wild, but maybe we can get together Saturday?

Soledad: Lottie has a gymnastics meet in Savannah. For God's sake, what was I thinking letting her start this shit? It's costing me an arm and a leg and all my spare time. Saturday's out.

Yasmen: Kassim's having a sleepover. Si is handling the restaurant and I'm manning the boys.

Sometimes it sucks to have domesticated friends.

Me: My week is packed. Literally something every night for a client or a founder. Guess I'll catch you up next week.

Soledad: Can you at least tell us if you met Maverick Bell?

I'm still reeling that he called today. I have a lot to unpack about that guy, but I'd rather do it with them in person. Instead of answering Soledad's question directly, I shoot for a time that I can fully explore all of this situation with the only people I trust completely. I need to see their faces when I tell them all that has transpired.

Me: What about next Sunday? I've been wanting to try that Korean bathhouse. You guys up for it?

Yasmen: I'm in! The reviews are amazing.

Soledad: Is that the one where you gotta get naked?

Me: Yes. Andddd?

Soledad: Uhhhhhhh… not sure. Naked?

Me: Chile, ain't nobody thinking about them lil' titties. LOL! Just come.

Yasmen: Sol, I'll bring my drooping tits and my stretch marks. Fuck anyone who has something to say about it.

Me: And I got a roll around the middle and a little FUPA. But you know I call it a FAP. Fat-ass pussy. Ayeeeee! Plus-size pussaaayyyy.

Soledad: Hen, what's really plus-size is your confidence.

Yasmen: Are our people doing this?

Me: Yesssss. Black folks are there too. Naked and unashamed and steamy and eating sushi.

I'm actually not too sure about the Black-to-other-folks ratio, but I just love pushing Soledad beyond her comfort zone because hilarity always ensues. I'll sit around naked for it just to outlast her.

Soledad: I'm not sure how I feel about my sushi that close to somebody's bare ass.

Yasmen: They're not preparing the food naked! Okay. I'm down!

I'm actually low-key shocked that Yasmen is going along with this.

Me: I dare you, Sol.

Soledad: That's not fair. You know I'm too competitive to let that go. I can't stand y'all. OKAY!!! I'll give it a try, but if I feel uncomfortable, I'm wearing a towel and nobody better take it from me.

Yasmen: Deal

Me: Deal… I guess, but watch your back 'cause I might snatch. hehehe

After a long soak in bubble bath and oil that costs so much it borders on immoral, I've just put on silk pajamas and slipped between my satin sheets when the phone rings. I reach over to grab it, sitting up straight when I see the caller.

"Aunt Geneva?" I reach to turn the bedside lamp back on. "Hey. Everything all right?"

"We're fine," she says. "How are you? How was Miami?"

"It was good. Business, but fun, too. I'm sorry Saturday night was rough. I'll get home soon. There's just so much stuff I have to be here for this month. I need to be on set for a couple of my clients and—"

"Hen, it's fine. I didn't call to make you feel guilty or put no pressure on you. Your mama's good. Already asleep for the night. Adding that magnesium like you suggested has helped a lot."

"Oh, good. I got in late, but I'll FaceTime early enough tomorrow to catch her before she turns in."

"That'll be nice," she says and then clears her throat. "I did need to talk to you about something."

My body goes on high alert. All the lassitude from my wine and hot bath coils into anxiety that starts in my belly and fans out across all my extremities. I tuck the silky duvet under my arms and lean forward in bed. "What's up, Aunt G?"

"I'm having a hysterectomy."

It's the last thing I was expecting her to say, and it lands on me and sinks in for a few seconds before I respond. A woman Aunt Geneva's age doesn't have much use for reproductive organs, but it's still a major surgery.

"Oh, wow." I frown. "Are you okay? When is the surgery?"

"Later this summer. They're backed up and that's the soonest I

can get in, but I wanted to let you know far in advance because I'll be on bedrest for a few weeks and won't be able to adequately monitor Betty. She has a few doctor's appointments that fall during my recovery time. We could bring in a nurse—"

"I'll come home." The words are out before I have time to think about what it will take to be away from Atlanta for weeks or what I'll have to rearrange. Most of the time I feel so helpless, unsure what I can do to make life easier for both of them. This feels tangible and necessary. They need me and I'll be there.

"You sure?" Despite what Aunt Geneva actually says, she sounds relieved.

"Of course. I'll come take care of Mama and you, too."

"You ain't gotta take care of me, honey."

"Yeah, I do. Unless Ellie's coming from Costa Rica?"

"Naw." Aunt Geneva makes a scoffing noise that manages to sound affectionate. "Not with them babies and the bar. It's too much."

Between two kids under the age of four, and the bar she and her husband own and operate, it's hard for my cousin Ellie to get home, but Aunt Geneva makes sure to see her grandkids a few times a year.

"Don't worry about a thing," I tell her. "I got you."

"If you have questions about something or need anything for your mama, I'll be around, just off my feet. And they'll arrange a meal train at the church for me, I'm sure, so you won't have to worry about food."

"I wasn't planning to worry about food," I joke, but she knows I mean it. "I'd have homecooked meals delivered if necessary."

"Well, that *won't* be necessary, Ms. Highfalutin'," she laughs. "It'll be good to have you home for a bit."

I sober, wrapping my mind and my heart around the thought of being steeped in the reality of Mama's condition every day. My chest goes tight, and my resolve wavers the tiniest bit. I know there is a lot I haven't dealt with when it comes to this, but I'm afraid that if I let all that emotion out, I won't ever be able to contain it again. It will run wild. I'm not sure I can do all the things I need to if that happens.

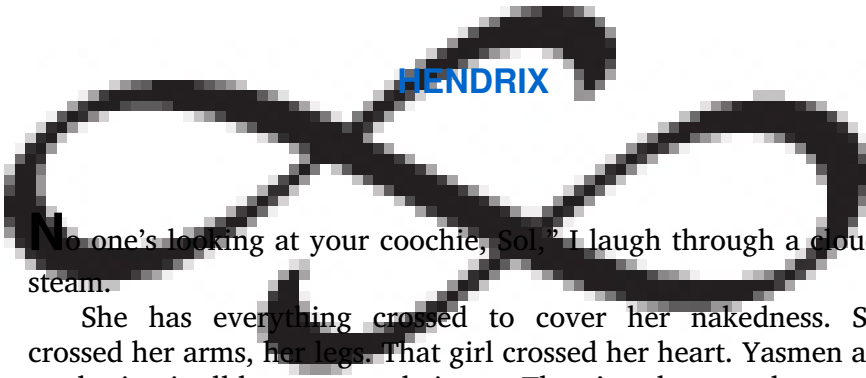
For some reason, and not for the first time, Maverick comes to mind. The rare understanding I found in his eyes Saturday night. The ease with which I voiced so many of the concerns about Mama

that I've bottled up. He drew me out and into an openness I haven't allowed myself with anyone. How do you articulate the ache of watching someone you love fade? It's hard to put into words, and when I met Maverick, I didn't have to. He already knew.

"I just wanted to check on you," Aunt Geneva says. "And tell you about my surgery."

"Thank you, Aunt G. Don't worry." I flop back onto my pillow and stare up at the ceiling as if the solutions to all my problems are sketched overhead. "I'll take care of everything."

CHAPTER 11



HENDRIX

No one's looking at your coochie, Sol," I laugh through a cloud of steam.

She has everything crossed to cover her nakedness. She's crossed her arms, her legs. That girl crossed her heart. Yasmen and I are letting it all hang out and air out. There's only one other woman in the steam room with us and she's had her eyes closed the whole time. I think she's fallen asleep.

"Well, I got it waxed just in case." Soledad giggles, looking girlish with her face free of makeup and her hair curling riotously around her shoulders.

"Who waxes *before* they come to the spa?" Yasmen asks, eyes closed and lips curved into a smile. She's regal, her coppery brown skin glistening with sweat and her braids gathered atop her head. "You know they offer that as a service here."

"Yes, but me and my man are the only people who get to see the bush in full bloom."

"How is our hot accountant, by the way?" I ask, leaning back and crossing my ankles. "I haven't seen Judah in forever."

"It's been bonkers for him at work." Soledad grimaces. "There's an audit he's overseeing. And Aaron just started this new group for cubers."

"Like Rubik's Cube?" I ask.

"Yeah," Soledad says. "We hope it encourages socialization. And Adam is in this new programming club, and Judah's been helping him navigate some of that. Like getting him some support at school."

Judah, a dad of twin boys on the autism spectrum, is a perfect match for Soledad. They both love their kids fiercely. After all the shit her ex-husband, Edward, put her through, it's amazing to see one of my best friends happy and finally being loved the way she deserves.

"Judah's such a great dad," Yasmen says, reaching for a small plastic cup of water.

"You both lucked out in the dad department," I tell them, standing to pour eucalyptus oil over the sauna rocks. "Not Edward, though, Sol. He wont shit."

Soledad snort-laughs and spits out a little of her water. "Agreed."

"Amen," Yasmen joins the joke.

"You guys still thinking about fostering, Yas?" Soledad asks, wiping the water from her face.

"I don't think so." Yasmen rests her chin on the knees pulled up to her chest. "We just got things on track for the kids. Hell, with each other. We're gonna hold here for a little bit and let the dust settle on our little family."

She looks between the two of us, a sad smile on her pretty face. "My therapist and I have concluded that longing for another baby may have stemmed from something I wanted to fix or make right for Henry."

Yasmen and her husband, Josiah, have been through a lot the last few years—losing his aunt who raised him, losing their baby Henry very late in Yasmen's pregnancy, financial struggles with their restaurant Grits, divorce, and then reconciling and remarrying. Yeah, letting the dust settle is probably a good choice.

The one other woman in the sauna stands, naked as the day she was born, and walks out without a word. Perfect timing because I wanted to broach the subject of what happened in Miami, but not with another set of ears present.

"Now that we're alone," I say, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees. "There's something I wanted to get your perspective on."

"Wait." Soledad stands, strategically covering the girly parts with her hands, and reaches for a towel. "I accepted your damn dare, but I cannot have a serious conversation with my nipples and snatch out."

"Pass me a towel, too." Yasmen casts me a sheepish look. "I was

determined to outlast Sol. I love y'all, but sitting around naked with you for the last ten minutes is a new level of bonding."

"Well, I'm not gonna be the only bare bitch up in here." I laugh, grabbing my towel from the corner to wrap and tuck it around me. "But let the record show I was the last woman standing."

"Kudos to you." Soledad rolls her eyes teasingly. "You win."

"So what'd you want our perspective on?" Yasmen asks, lying back on the bench with a towel now tucked around her torso.

"When I was in Miami—"

"Oooh, I been waiting for this." Soledad's face is wreathed in avid curiosity. "You got any tea on Zere and Mav?"

"Um, kinda?" I shrug. "I mean, not much more than what everybody already knows."

"I heard he cheated on her." Yasmen turns her head to catch my eye through the steam. "Did he?"

"No." I shake my head and frown. "At least not as far as I know. She didn't say that. She said…"

I glance around the hot box furtively as if I'm making sure we're the only three in here.

"This stays in the vault," I tell them, smoothing all humor from my expression. "For real."

"You know we got you," Soledad assures me, leaning forward. "Now tell it."

"I'm dying over here," Yasmen says. "I know I look calm, but the questions are eating my stomach from the inside out."

We all laugh, and I allow myself a smile.

"It's not that serious," I say. "But Zere's really hurting, and I want to be sensitive to that in how I handle this thing."

"What's the thing?" Soledad asks.

"Okay, so like I said, as far as I know, he didn't cheat," I tell them. "But the split may not have been as mutual as their statement made it out to be."

"I knew it!" Soledad covers her mouth with both hands. "She dumped him. *She* cheated?"

"Nobody cheated," I start, but swallow my next words when two more women enter the sauna.

"I think we've been in long enough," Yasmen says, sliding off the bench and heading for the door. "Let's finish this outside."

We go to the locker room, which is packed. I give them a meaningful look that says *Hold that thought*. By the time we've

showered, gotten clothes on, and are seated in the dining area with our sushi, my friends are practically vibrating with anticipation.

"Oh, my gosh, spill," Soledad says, eyes stretched wide. "What happened?"

Carefully glancing around to make sure no one is near enough to hear, I drop my voice, and lean in.

"She wanted kids and he didn't." I sit back and lift my brows to the *How ya like them apples?* level.

Their expressions fall.

"Dassit?" Yasmen demands. "That's your juicy tidbit you need our perspective on?"

"Gotta say." Soledad tsks and lifts her bottled water for a sip. "I was expecting more."

"That's not what I need your perspective on," I say. I'm not sure how to put it. There is no hard evidence supporting the misgiving that's been building in my belly every time I think about my interactions with Maverick Bell. "He and I…"

"He and *you*?" Yasmen straightens in the chair from her disappointed slump. "Y'all what?"

"Not like that." I sigh. "Before I knew who he was, we had a moment at the bar. Like… not flirting, but vibing."

"Vibing?" Soledad looks rapt again. "Go on."

"To be clear, he was not flirting with me," I say. "We just kind of connected? And he said he had seen me on the dance floor."

"On the dance floor?" Yasmen chuckles. "You turned that party out, didn't you? Did you harass the DJ into playing 'Feels Good'?"

"Of course not," I scoff, rolling my eyes. "It was 'Candy' by Cameo."

"That was gonna be my second guess," Soledad offers smugly. "Cameo always brings them to the floor."

"I may have led a few… okay, half… the people at the party in the electric slide."

"Oh, Lord." Yasmen shakes her head, reaching for her Diet Coke. "Please tell me you did not mesmerize that man with your hips."

"I do have a rather hypnotic ass," I say with a cackle. "But I digress. He mentioned that he saw me cutting up on the dance floor. And then we started talking about what I do for a living, and I mentioned the Aspire Fund. He said he might want to invest. And then I noticed a line of people hovering, wanting to see him, and

found out he was the host. *He* was Maverick Bell. I didn't recognize him at first."

"Wow." Yasmen rests her chin in her hand and watches me closely. Too closely. "How was he?"

"He was just a guy." I shrug, forcing nonchalance.

Best not to mention how my cells seemed to pulse when he focused all his attention on me. Or how the energy around him magnetized the room. It feels like my skin is thinning. Like I've been hiding something, maybe even from myself, and I'm turning translucent under my friends' scrutiny.

"By the time I realized who he was, Chapel and Zere came over. Then Aunt Geneva called all upset."

"Was it your mom?" Yasmen's brows snap together. "What happened?"

"Mama was anxious, so I got her to calm down, but the three of them overheard." I pause and then finish. "*He* overheard and shared that his grandfather passed away of Alzheimer's a few years ago. Then when we were down by the dock—"

"What was y'all doing down by the dock?" Soledad asks, a piece of rice flying from her mouth with the rush to get the words out. "Girl."

"It wasn't like that." I rub the back of my neck, which feels inexplicably hot. "It really wasn't, but he said if I ever needed to talk, he's available. It's such a unique experience, what I'm navigating with Mama, and he understood."

"And that was it?" Yasmen turns her lips down. "That's nothing to—"

"And then he called me," I add.

The muted conversation of other diners is the only sound around us for a few seconds.

"Called you to say what?" Soledad asks, her chopsticks clutching sushi and hovering at her mouth.

"He said he wanted to know more about the Aspire Fund." I look between the two of them as if for confirmation. "Which is totally normal, right? We'd been talking about it."

"Yeah." Yasmen stretches the word out like an accordion. "Hen, what *aren't* you telling us?"

"Oh, I think I know what she's leaving out," Soledad says, studying her phone with brows lifted. "This."

She turns the phone around and *dammit*. The Instagram photo

of Maverick Bell says the quiet part out loud.

"Dayummmm," Yasmen mutters, taking the phone from Soledad.

Maverick is on the beach, holding a surfboard stuck in the sand. Against the backdrop of the gloriously azure Pacific Ocean, he's a brushstroke of golden-brown skin, still dripping wet from his swim. There's the beginning of a smile on his face, but not quite fully formed. The confidence that radiated off him in waves when he was dressed is just as evident with him half naked. Maybe even more. His wetsuit is rolled down to his waist, exposing that devil-made V slashing at his hips. There was a hint of muscle in the loose-fitting shirt he wore at the party, but this photo tells the whole carved, unmitigated truth of this man's chest and arms and shoulders. Even his neck looks…

"Okay," I mumble. "I was *just* getting to the part about him being really fine and lickable."

Two sets of eyes bounce from me to the photo of Maverick and back again.

"What's going on, Hen?" Yasmen asks.

"Nothing is going on." I slice one hand through the air. Decisive. "At all, but when he called…"

These are my best friends. I need them to help me sort this weirdness out and to make sure I don't do anything stupid. Don't *feel* anything stupid. Their patient silence encourages me to go on.

"When he called," I continue softly, toying with my chopsticks, "my heart kinda skipped a beat and my pulse picked up and I… I think I'm attracted to him."

"He's an attractive man." Soledad glances at the photo. "I mean, Black surfer boy. Whew. I'm getting Judah a board."

Giggles overtake the table for a few seconds, but we sober and I wait for them to say more as Soledad keeps scrolling across his socials.

"Ohhhh, nice," Soledad says, brows raised high. "He donated twenty million dollars to Finley College."

"The HBCU?" I ask. "Didn't know that. Generous."

"It's natural to be attracted to someone who looks like that." Yasmen nods to the phone at the center of the table. "And he's wealthy, successful—"

"Kind," I interject, because that was probably the most magnetic thing about him—how kind he was. How he understood

and offered compassion that maybe no one else at that party even knew how to.

"Kind," Yasmen echoes, watching me closely. "That's a pretty compelling combination, so it's natural to find him attractive, but that's it, right? I mean, isn't Zere your business partner? Aren't you doing Chapel's show with her?"

"Yes, I am. For sure. That's why I wanted to bounce this off you guys. He called to follow up about Aspire—learn more about the fund and meet current portfolio companies."

"That's fine," Soledad says. "Still okay, right?"

"Yeah. He asked me to text him the information once we nail down the details and I… I felt like I should make sure he knew that I planned to tell Zere about him possibly investing so she would know about our business connection."

"Good," Yasmen says. "And what'd he say?"

"He was fine with it." I lick my lips. "I just want to make sure that all sounds aboveboard to you."

"Why wouldn't it be?" Soledad tilts her head and considers me. "Hell, I get a pounding heart and a racing pulse at an estate sale. I haven't heard anything that sounds out of bounds."

I chuckle, allowing my shoulders to relax. "Okay. Just needed a gut check from you guys. Make sure I'm not crossing any lines. I can't afford to. Pretty sure Zere's still in love with him."

Yasmen nods. "And if she even suspected for a moment there was something up with you and Maverick—"

"It might ruin my chance to do this show and possibly Chapel's chance, too." I trace a pattern on the table with my index finger before glancing back up at them.

"You don't think she'd take it out on Chapel, do you?" Yasmen asks.

"I honestly don't know." I shrug. "She's hurt and I haven't known her long enough to predict how she would respond."

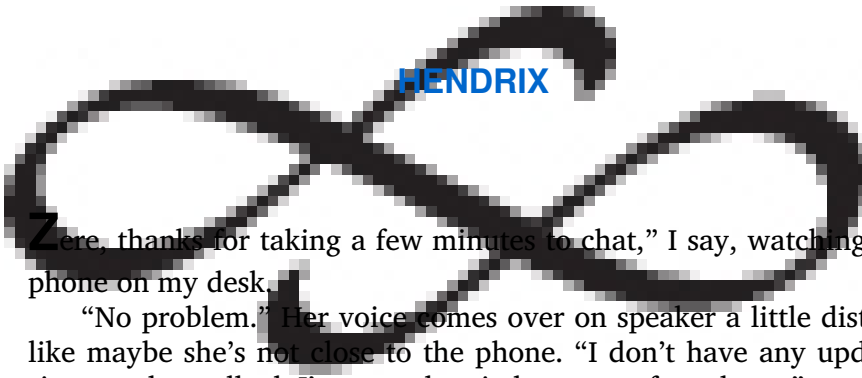
I bounce a look between my two best friends.

"Though to be clear," I say, "right now it's all moot because attraction or not, I'm not acting on it."

Yasmen watches me for an extra second. "You've gotten this far knowing what's right for you, for your business. Trust yourself to keep doing what's best for you."

"Don't worry." I gulp my water and the last of my reservations. "I will."

CHAPTER 12



HENDRIX

"Zere, thanks for taking a few minutes to chat," I say, watching the phone on my desk.

"No problem." Her voice comes over on speaker a little distant, like maybe she's not close to the phone. "I don't have any updates since we last talked. I've sent the pitch out to a few places."

"Yeah, I sent it to the contacts I mentioned, too. They'll get back to me probably next week or soon after."

"Same. You said you had something you wanted to discuss?"

"It's not anything related to the show. I actually just wanted to give you a heads-up."

"Oh, yeah?" She sounds a little distracted, and I wonder if it's a bad time.

"It's about Maverick."

The silence on the other end stretches out for a few seconds, but it's alert and tight. "What about him?" She doesn't sound distant anymore. It sounds as if she's right beside the phone now.

"He's interested in possibly investing in my venture capital fund for Black women–led businesses, and I just wanted you to know since… since you guys—"

"Just broke up?" Zere's laugh is short and sharp, the tip of a knife. "Believe me. You're probably the only one treading lightly about that subject. I get asked several times a day what happened. I'm sick of people digging into my business."

"Of course. I wouldn't have even mentioned it, except he'll be coming to Atlanta for our fund's showcase and I didn't want you to think there was anything going on. I wanted you to know since you

and I are working together, too."

She giggles. "You mean that I might think the two of *you* had something going? That's hilarious, Hen."

Hilarious? Before I can ask why the concept of her ex-boyfriend and me being attracted to each other is so damn funny, she tells me in no uncertain terms.

"You're not his type at all."

"Not his type?" I should leave it there. I don't want her thinking I *am* his type. "What do you mean?"

"Well, he likes women who are…" She must hear her feet squishing in the shit she just stepped in.

It's a ridiculous notion to her that a man like Maverick would be drawn to someone like me; that I, a plus-sized woman, could pose a threat to her. Her unspoken assumption doesn't offend me. It doesn't hurt. I grew up with careless adults telling me I was pretty for a big girl or for a brown girl. My parents made sure I always felt beautiful in my skin and in my body. They instilled a confidence in me that not even the thoughtless words of this beautiful woman can dent.

"He goes for women like you, right?" I fill in her awkward gap. "Thin? Mixed chicks? Long, curly hair?"

"Oh, gosh, Hendrix, no. I didn't mean it like that." In her haste to fix it, her words tumble over each other. "I just meant that I know you would never do that to me. And he wouldn't either for that matter."

"Got it." I whoosh out a short breath and push a smile into my voice. "Well, I just wanted to keep the air clear between us by letting you know in case you saw him in a photo on socials from the event or something. That you would have context."

"I might have wondered about it, but wouldn't have jumped to any conclusions. I'm glad you told me, though. I appreciate it."

"Okay, well, when I start hearing back from my contacts about the show, I'll let you know."

"Same here. Thanks again, Hendrix."

We disconnect and I hold the phone in my palm for a few seconds. We've set the details for the showcase. I could just have Skipper contact Maverick.

You text me.

The man's probably the wealthiest potential limited partner on our list. I'd pay special attention to any other LP with the kind of

capital Maverick has. It's not different.

Me: Hey. You asked me to let you know when the showcase details were set. It's going to be in three weeks here in Atlanta.

Silence and no bubbles or movement for a few seconds.

Me: Oh, it's Hendrix, by the way.

Maverick: Hi, Hendrix by the way. Good to hear from you.

I don't even physically hear his voice, and yet my imagination purrs it in my ear.

Maverick: Did you tell Zere about my interest?

In the fund, Hendrix. He means interest in the fund, of course.

Me: Yes, she was fine with it.

Maverick: I knew she would be, but glad you let her know.

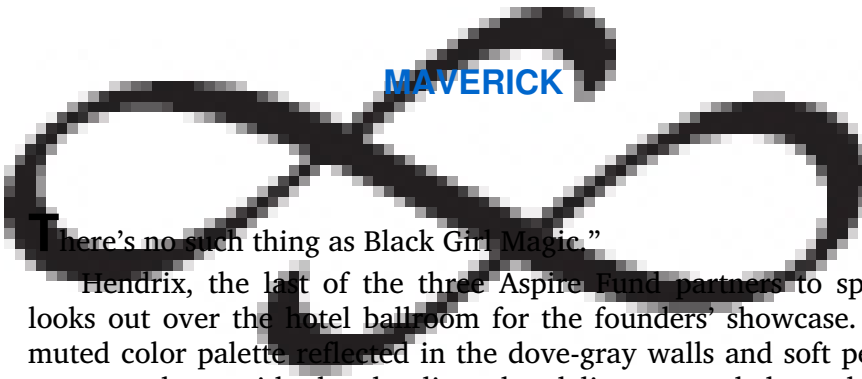
Me: So my assistant will email your office a more formal invitation with all the details.

In other words, I did what you asked, now no more personal attention.

Maverick: Guess I'll see you then.

Yeah, see you then.

CHAPTER 13



MAVERICK

"There's no such thing as Black Girl Magic."

Hendrix, the last of the three Aspire Fund partners to speak, looks out over the hotel ballroom for the founders' showcase. The muted color palette reflected in the dove-gray walls and soft peach accents, along with the dazzling chandelier suspended overhead, creates an atmosphere that is somehow intimate and elegant. Radiating power and confidence, Hendrix takes her time assessing those assembled. Even at the back of the crowd, I feel how this woman just being in a room manages to stir its air.

"I know as soon as I said that," she goes on, her full lips tipping into a wry grin. "Many of you inwardly responded the way my grandfather did when I was growing up in the country: *The hell you say.*"

Laughter trickles through the room, and Hendrix waits for the humor to abate. She's standing up front now, but even all night mingling with the crowd, she's been hard to look away from; beautifully conspicuous, like a flamingo, standing tall in her bright pink dress. The bodice is some kind of bustier, the ribbing subtly sequined. The waist nips in and flares to accommodate her rounded hips, but tapers to the long line of her legs. Instead of shying away from her height, Hendrix plays it up with glittery stilettos that put her at eye level or above most men in the room. On many women, it would feel like a statement. On some, it would telegraph *I'm trying too hard* or *I've got something to prove.* But on Hendrix, the *I don't give a fuck what you think* message resounds throughout the room as surely as if she had rung a bell.

“I know that for many of you,” she continues, “shoot, for me, there was a time when questioning Black Girl Magic would feel like sacrilege. It’s our battle cry, our hashtag, our reassurance that there is maybe something mystical propelling us to rise above every obstacle every time.”

Determination sweeps the last residue of laughter from her eyes.

“We are not magic,” she says. “We are resilient. It’s not a wand. It’s work. We work harder and shine brighter to survive. Excellence for us has been a matter of necessity. In a climate where less than half a percent of venture capital funding goes to Black women, women founders still perform sixty-three percent better than all-male founding teams in the first round. With those odds, we can’t leave our success to chance and we for sure can’t depend on magic.”

She relaxes the line of her jaw, settling into a smile. “But we can depend on some of you. The brilliant, industrious women who are our Aspire founders are not asking for charity. They are counting on your gut instinct for a great investment, depending on the most successful among us to know a good deal when they see it.”

She points to a young woman in the crowd, maybe in her late thirties, who wears a colorful headdress and flawless makeup.

“Take Hannah Carter, for example,” Hendrix says. “You may have met her tonight, or maybe you saw her in *Forbes* or on CNN or in *Wired* magazine. Hue, her cosmetic company utilizing groundbreaking technology for full-proof color matching, is approaching nine figures in revenue. She was part of our first round of funding, and like so many, has more than fulfilled the promise of greatness we recognized in her from the start.”

Hendrix’s eyes soften, and she shares a quick smile with Hannah before continuing.

“She downsized her car, crowdfunded the first six figures to launch her company, and at one point in her journey…” Hendrix says, pausing to make room for her next words, “… took out a second mortgage on her house. That’s not magic. It’s sacrifice. It’s grit. It’s the best kind of obstinacy that refuses to stay down when put down. And it embodies the spirit of the Aspire Fund.”

She nods to another woman seated near the front who sports an abundance of natural curls.

“Or Halle Jenson, who recognized that Black hair care is a

three-billion-dollar market, with only three percent of it owned by Black women. Watch out for Coil, her new hair-care line that we are looking to scale."

It's so quiet, I hear the people beside me breathing. Hendrix holds us all rapt and eating out of her well-manicured hand.

"The definition of 'aspire' is to long for, aim, or seek ambitiously," Hendrix says. "To be eagerly desirous, especially for something of great or high value. Too often, ambition becomes a dirty word when applied to women. Not here. We encourage the women of Aspire to long for, to aim, and to seek. We want to be an incubator for Black women's highest ambitions and hopes and accomplishments."

She spreads a smile around the room. "As you mingle and meet our founders, we hope you'll consider joining us for the second round."

The other two women, Nelly and Kashawn, rejoin her at the podium and they link arms.

"We're so glad to have you here," Nelly, the senior of the three women says. "Don't let all this good food and booze go to waste."

"Enjoy yourselves," Kashawn adds. "We're available to answer any questions. Thank you for coming."

Needing a distraction from the hint of cleavage Hendrix's dress revealed and the way her voice dipped the whole room in honey, I swiftly leave the ballroom and head for the veranda. As I make my way through the crowd, people grab drinks and heavy hors d'oeuvres from trays. Several of them recognize me, try to catch my eye, but I ignore them. I'm not here for whatever they have in mind. I slip through the balcony doors and take in a lungful of cool air after the stuffy room.

"We're leaving soon, right?" Bolt asks, joining me on the balcony and surveying the illuminated Atlanta skyline.

"Yeah." I rest my half-empty glass on the flat balcony railing.

"Tell me again why we're here," Bolt says, standing next to me and nursing the one alcoholic drink he'll allow himself all night.

"Just doing some research."

But between Bolt and the financial adviser who digs up every known fact about any prospective investment, I've gathered all I need to know about Aspire. This trip wasn't necessary. I glance over my shoulder back into the ballroom, and a flash of bright pink catches my eye.

Inside, Hendrix stands at the center of a group of people. For a second, her gaze collides with mine and she doesn't look away. Neither do I. It's like a showdown, but after a few seconds, she slides her eyes away like she can't be bothered to participate anymore.

"Research, huh?" Bolt huffs a breath, skepticism in the look he angles at me. "The fund or her?"

I meet my assistant's eyes squarely. "What?"

"I've worked with you long enough to recognize disruptions in your pattern." He gives an almost indiscernible tilt of his head in Hendrix's direction. "She's a disruption."

"Fuck outta here. You're reading too much into this."

"We were meeting when she texted you." He adjusts his ever-present bow tie, tonight one with red polka dots. "You were, dare I say, borderline giddy."

"No, you don't dare say if you want to keep your job," I threaten with mock severity.

"And immediately after that text you mentioned coming to Atlanta soon."

"Quite the detective, aren't—"

"Two things seem to truly pique your interest lately," Bolt goes on, ignoring the exasperated look I'm pinning him with. "Buying the Vipers and this small venture capital fund that wouldn't typically register as a blip on your radar. Why are we here when there are a dozen opportunities that actually would merit your personal attention? What are you doing?"

I frown and swing him a querying glance. "What do you mean, what am I doing?"

"She's producing a show with Zere." In the light of the balcony lamps, Bolt manages to look simultaneously curious and knowing. "Do you not see that as a problem?"

I force myself not to look over my shoulder and find Hendrix again in that dazzling pink. "Business is business. Zere knows I'm looking to invest in Hendrix's fund."

"She has no idea how you look at her, though."

"I don't look…" I shake my head and blow out a breath, impatient not with him, but with myself. "I barely know the woman."

"True, which is why I think we're here."

I can't win in this conversation, and the last thing I want to do

is examine whether Bolt's assessment has any merit.

"Sorry to interrupt," a young woman says, appearing beside me. "Excuse me, Mr. Bell."

She's average height and has golden-brown locs gathered into an elegant chignon. She's slim thick and when she speaks, every word is perfectly articulated but seems to *lean*, each syllable taking its time in her Southern drawl. Polished with an edge is how I'd describe her.

"And you are?" Bolt asks, lifting one imperious brow.

"Ms. Barry's assistant." She tilts her head in a way that suggests she believes it's none of his business. "I'm Skipper."

"That's your adult name?" Bolt asks, rude even for him.

"That's your adult bow tie?" She bristles. "And, yes, Skipper is my government name."

"Didn't we speak on the phone about arrangements for this event?" Bolt demands, eyes narrowed.

"Oh, let me see." Skipper touches her chin. "Rude, bougie, unpleasant—yeah, that conversation is coming back to me. I believe I hung up on you."

"You were incompetent, I recall," Bolt says. "Sent the wrong address for the event."

"No, as I tried explaining, but you wouldn't listen, there was a change of venue," she corrects, her smile at him a rictus of contempt as she turns her attention very pointedly back to me. "As I was saying, *Mr. Bell*."

She pauses to sniff dismissively in Bolt's direction. The more annoyed she becomes with Bolt, the deeper her drawl becomes.

"I'm Hendrix's executive assistant. I wanted to make sure you have everything *you* need."

"I think I'm good," I say, making my voice extra pleasant to atone for Bolt's rudeness. "We'll be leaving in a few minutes."

"Oh, then I'm glad I caught you before you left," Hendrix says from the door leading back into the ballroom.

It's our first time being face-to-face since Miami, and my senses are instantly on alert.

"I was just making sure Mr. Bell didn't need anything," Skipper says, leveling a disdainful glance on Bolt. "Since it seems he may have inadequate personal support."

"*I'm* inadequate?" Bolt practically spits, taking a step closer to Skipper. "You strike me as the kind of woman who gets the word of

the day in her email, but can only handle one a week without confusing maturation and masturbation."

"Funny you mention masturbation," Skipper fires back, taking a step closer to Bolt, standing a few inches above him and leaving little space between them. "Since you strike me as a man who has no other options."

"Skipper!" Hendrix's horrified gaze bounces from her assistant to mine. She looks as mystified as I am by the escalating tension between our staff.

"Oh, it's fine, Ms. Barry," Bolt says. "I would expect no more from a woman whose namesake is a character from *Gilligan's Island*."

"It was Barbie's sister, dickhead," Skipper snaps, before turning to Hendrix. "Sorry. You know I don't do well with lower life-forms."

And she storms off.

Hendrix and I both look to Bolt who, for some inexplicable reason, starts after her, calling over his shoulder, "I'll be back in ten."

I stare after his departing figure, shoulders held tight and his gait stiff and yet… eager?

"Bolt's never behaved that way," I say, almost apologetically.

"Skipper's usually the most even-tempered woman you'd ever meet." Hendrix pauses to narrow her eyes. "Why do I feel like we just witnessed some kind of hostile mating ritual?"

"You think they're smashing right now?"

"Oh, a hundred percent."

Our gazes tangle and laughter erupts from us both.

"It was like an episode of *Will & Grace*," she says. "Kind of Karen and Beverley Leslie, but with prickly sexual vibes."

"I've never seen *Will & Grace*," I admit. "But I'll take your word for it."

"You've never seen…" Her dark eyes go wide, the feathery false lashes nearly brushing her brows. "Oh you gotta watch. It's a classic."

"One of your favorites?"

"Well, yes. Not *the* favorite, but one of them."

"What's *the* favorite?"

"Wow. That's tough." She kicks off one shoe and wiggles her toes. "Don't look at my feet. I didn't have time for a pedicure."

I glance down.

“What did I just say?” She chokes out a laugh. “Don’t look at my feet.”

She tucks the bare foot behind her ankle, effectively hiding it, but not before I’ve seen the dark, chipped polish. It’s a pretty foot with a high arch. The tiny imperfection makes me feel like I’ve gotten a glimpse behind a gilded curtain—not just the polish on her toes, but the polish on *her*. That I’ve seen something real, authentic.

“Hmmmm.” She tilts her head back. “All-time favorite may be *The Wire*.”

“Ohhhhh,” I say approvingly, leaning one elbow on the balcony railing. “Good taste. You like *Top Boy*, too?”

“I’ve never seen it. I need something really good to watch.”

I pound the balcony railing with one fist. “Damn, I envy you getting to watch that for the first time. It’s British. I’ve only gotten through season one, but it’s incredible. Like *The Wire*, but East London. So fucking good.”

She flutters her fingertips together. “I’m in.”

“Watch *Summerhouse* first. Sort of a prequel, but it’s short.”

“If I got nothing else from tonight,” she says, “I have a new show to watch.”

“Seems like you’ll get a lot out of tonight.” I nod my chin over my shoulder toward the ballroom. “Quite a presentation you and your partners put on. And you have a great group of founders. Thanks for inviting me.”

“See anything you like?”

I consider her in the light of lamps and moonbeams with her skin warm and deep chestnut against the vibrant pink of her dress.

I see something I like much more than I should.

“You already know I want in on Hue,” I answer the unwittingly loaded question as innocuously as possible.

“Of course. I’d be surprised if you didn’t. Anything else intrigue you?”

Too many wrong answers to that question, too.

I settle on: “We’ll see.”

“Take all the time you need.” She leans her elbows on the railing and stares at the view, her profile a bold etching against the city’s glow. “I appreciate you coming.”

I weigh the question that has been plaguing me since I first saw her tonight.

“I meant to check earlier, but there wasn’t time,” I say. “How’s

your mother?"

She drops her chin the slightest bit and bites her bottom lip before snapping her head back to a proud angle. "Hanging in there. Doing pretty well, considering. My aunt's having major surgery in a few weeks. She'll be on bedrest and will need assistance with Mama, so I'll be going home to help."

It was always tough seeing my grandfather after not visiting for a while. Every time I saw him for the first time again, his vitality seemed to be fading a little more. Alzheimer's as a concept a few states away is very different from the daily reality of it in person.

"You know," I say, "my mom got into a support group for loved ones and caretakers. That might not be a bad idea for you, especially as things progress."

Something akin to panic freezes on her face for a moment, but then melts into resignation. "You're probably right. I think being home that long might force me to face the inevitability of this situation in a way I haven't had to before."

"And home is where?"

"Charlotte. Well, a little town right outside of it. When you're from a rural area, you kinda just claim the closest big city."

"I would never have pegged you for 'rural.'"

"I country code switch," she laughs. "Let me get around my people for a few minutes and the country comes out. So you grew up on the West Coast?"

"Pretty much. When I was young, my dad played for the Clippers. The team had relocated from Buffalo to San Diego and then to LA, which is where I was born."

"Your dad played with them his whole career?"

"Nah, near the end he got traded a few times. We bounced around some, but we kept our place in LA. When he retired, we moved back there until he got a job as an assistant coach with the Vegas Vipers."

"So you spent a lot of time in Vegas?"

"Yeah, middle school, high school. Even though I was born in Cali, Vegas felt most like home. It's a hustler's town. Risk is in its blood, and that appealed to me."

"So you played ball?"

"Like most sons of pro ballers I thought I could dribble in my father's footsteps," I say, mocking myself. "My mom stole some inches from me, her short self."

“She was petite?”

“Yeah, man. Like five four. My dad’s six six.”

“And you’re what? Six feet?”

“Six two.”

“You got me by a few inches.”

“Not tonight in those shoes.” I let my eyes slide down her body, suppressing the urge to linger on her breasts and everything on the way to her feet. “In those, we’re about the same height.”

By the time my gaze finds hers again, her eyes are narrowed on me. Not necessarily suspicious. Cautious. She should be. Under normal circumstances, I’d make a play. Take a chance. Ask her out because the pull between us is evident, and if I’m being honest, has been since I sat down beside her at my party. But these aren’t normal circumstances. Since she’s doing this show with Zere, I’m not sure they ever will be.

“So you defer college to work with your dad for a bit,” she says. “And then go to Caltech, knock up your STEM girlfriend, she gives you an app and a baby, and a happily ever after?”

“Not quite. We were both happy with the app and the baby, just not with each other for ever after. As friends, yeah. She didn’t want to run a business. She wanted to teach and to cash a nice fat check each month, so she sold her controlling interest to me. Still owned a little piece, but not enough to carry much responsibility.”

“And you made a ton of money off gambling?”

“You judging?”

“No, admiring. I’ve never been into chance, in real life or virtually. I’m more of a calculated risk kind of girl.”

“I calculate to a certain point. If my gut points me in a different direction than my calculations, I’ll usually choose my gut.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have thought that about you.”

“I’ve never been afraid to risk or lose it all. I can always rebuild. I’ve had to sometimes. Not bankrupt, but damn close. So close I thought I’d lose everything.”

“What saved you?”

“Some investments no one thought I should make.” I laugh at the surprise on her face. “No, really. Literally everyone on my team at the time advised me not to invest in this.”

“What was it?”

“Weed.” I say it with a straight face, but can’t hold my laugh back when her mouth drops open. “Your expression right now.”

I reach one finger under her chin to gently push her jaw closed. There's a sizzle where our skin meets, and it burns through the thin skin of my fingertip. She slowly tilts her head until my touch falls away. The amusement drains from her striking features at the same time the smile fades from mine.

"Ahem." She licks her lips, glances down at her shoes, and resumes the conversation, her voice a shade huskier. "Weed, huh?"

"Medical marijuana, yeah. Though now with so many states legalizing it, I've invested in quite a few farms focused on recreational production."

"And that saved you?"

"I mean, I wasn't gonna be living on the streets, but it kept me very wealthy, and made me more so."

"Now you've sold the app and made billionaire status."

"To misquote, reports of my wealth have been greatly exaggerated."

"Oh, so you're not the next Black billionaire?"

"Maybe next, but not quite yet. I should be soon. It's been a goal of mine for a really long time."

"Since when?"

I screw up my mouth and narrow one eye. "Maybe twelve years old?"

"Twelve?" Her laugh is incredulous. "Are you shitting me?"

"Nope. I was the kid with the lemonade stand and the lawn-mowing business and a constant hustle. I even shined shoes for guys on my dad's team. They didn't actually need it. They just indulged me, but I didn't care. Money was money."

"I guess I thought you being the kid of a professional basketball player, you'd have been kind of spoiled."

I take a sip of my drink and lean against the balcony rail.

"My mom wasn't having that. I got an allowance, had chores. She kept life as normal as possible for me, even though I saw my dad on television more than at home for years."

She pinches her brows together and reaches to cover my hand.

"I can't imagine how hard it was losing your mom soon after your grandfather. I'm sorry."

"It could have been a decade and I wouldn't have been ready. My father never could have been. They had one of those great loves."

She lifts her hand, and I miss the contact right away. Have to

stop myself from grabbing it back.

"My parents had that, too," she says.

"For real? How'd they get together?"

"In the eighth grade," she says with a grin. "If you can believe it. Well, at least that was when they first met. My father used to say he knew right away Mama was supposed to be his wife."

"She was feeling him, too?"

"Nope. She made him work for it." Amusement lights her dark eyes and her smile is so pretty I almost forget what the hell I asked. "They didn't start dating until the tenth grade, but that was it. They went off to college together. Got married as soon as they graduated. No looking back."

"Based on what you've said, with your aunt taking care of your mom… is your father not—"

"He died six years ago." She draws a breath in sharply through her nose. "Drunk driver."

"Fuck." This time I reach for her hand on the railing. She doesn't pull away, but returns the squeeze. "I'm so sorry, Hendrix."

"It was the most painful day of my life." She shoots me a wry look. "Only the day my mom was diagnosed came close. It's like you said. The difference between someone being snatched away unexpectedly and someone falling away a little every day like sand."

"Both ways suck. It feels like my father will grieve forever."

"Same. My mother… she'll get this look in her eyes. She gets kind of stuck in earlier seasons of life, and it's nostalgic, but this is different. This is a longing. She does have hallucinations occasionally, and I wonder if she's seeing my dad because she looks so happy. I hate that she's happiest when she's hallucinating and that real life feels bleak and disorienting to her sometimes. It's so hard to see her this way and to know it's only going to…"

A lone tear streaks down her cheek.

"Shit." Hendrix swipes under her eyes with the hand I'm not holding and leaks a watery laugh. "This is a morbid-ass conversation, Mav."

I enjoy the simple intimacy of her abbreviating my name. This whole encounter feels like we've fallen into a well, and the rest of the world is above ground, completely oblivious that down here, we're getting to know each other. It shouldn't be this easy to bare your soul, but I could stay at the bottom of this well all night

learning Hendrix's secrets, her fears. Sharing mine.

"Sorry about that," Bolt says, striding back onto the balcony.

Hendrix does jerk her hand away then as if the touch she'd forgotten about suddenly burns.

Bolt lifts his brows, inspecting the spot on the balcony rail where our hands were joined seconds ago. "Am I interrupting?"

"Why is your bow tie upside down?" I demand, diverting the suspicion back to him. "And you have lipstick on your collar."

He glares at me and parts his lips to reply, I'm sure with something rude and insubordinate, but Skipper comes up behind him, equally disheveled. Her locs, earlier tamed into an elegant style, now hang around her shoulders, half up, half down. The buttons on her blouse are misaligned like she's tried to hastily restore her appearance to some semblance of order.

"I think your, um, shirt is…" Hendrix gestures vaguely toward Skipper's torso where her bra is playing peekaboo through a small tear in the blouse.

"Oh." Skipper's hand flies up to cover her heart and other things. She aims a malevolent look at Bolt. "This is your fault."

"My fault?" he hisses. "You're the one who—"

"I think we should probably go," I interrupt, pushing away from the railing. "Before you get arrested for indecent exposure."

He looks shamefaced for about a second before his usual arrogant mask falls into place.

"The driver's downstairs waiting," he says stiffly.

"I should go fix this," Skipper says, clutching her torn blouse a little tighter. "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Bell."

"It was certainly an experience, Skipper," I say, keeping my tone neutral as much as I want to tease them both. I'll wait until we're alone.

She turns to walk away, but pauses and scowls over her shoulder at Bolt. "Don't call me."

"Wasn't planning to," he answers, rolling his eyes.

As soon she's gone, his rigid mouth yields the tiniest scrap of a smile.

God, spare me Bolt infatuated. I can withstand a lot, but not my near-robotic assistant navigating actual emotions.

"It was good seeing you again," I tell Hendrix.

I'm surprised at how much I want to stay. I have business, pressing business to take care of in Seattle and we're flying there as

soon as I leave. My mind would typically already be on the next thing, but my brain is snagged on this woman.

And that's not good.

I've been attracted to women many times, but this, the way my mind frazzles and sharpens simultaneously when I'm talking to Hendrix, how aware I am of where she is at all times. It's annoying to be this tuned in to someone I barely know, to feel this compelled to share so much with someone I'm not even certain yet that I should trust.

"If you have any questions," Hendrix says, her face carefully smoothed into a flat expression, "you can contact my office. Skipper will make sure we connect."

I want to disrupt that studied indifference.

"I'll call *you*," I assert.

Her lips tighten, and that impassivity cracks for a nanosecond before she snaps it back in place. "Of course. I'm available to answer any questions you have about Aspire's portfolio or any of our founders."

I don't know why I'm resisting her efforts to rebuild the wall of politeness that seems to collapse as soon as we start talking. I should want that, too. I want to see what's behind that wall, though, even if I can't ever touch what I find.

"The driver, Mav," Bolt reminds me, staring at his phone. He's not fooling me. He's as attuned to my interaction with Hendrix as surely as if his phone were an antenna.

"Right." I give Hendrix the smile I would offer any business associate. "I'll be in touch."

Once in the car, I let out a breath that's been caged in my ribs for the better part of the night. The effort of not paying attention to Hendrix was more taxing than I'd realized.

"Shit," Bolt mutters, jerking off his bow tie and unbuttoning his shirt, which has lipstick smeared around the collar like someone was trying to chew his neck.

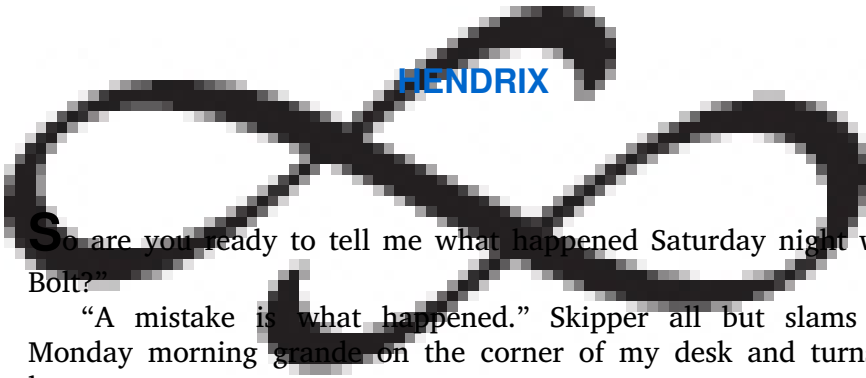
"Did you really fuck a perfect stranger at a founders' showcase?" I ask, unable to hide my shocked amusement. To call his behavior tonight out of character would be an understatement.

"There's nothing perfect about that woman." He glowers at the parade of lights the skyline offers as we drive through downtown Atlanta, but a smile teases the corner of his mouth. I drop my head back against the car's seat cushions. At least one of us needs to be

reasonable. To my dismay, it's not him.

And I'm afraid pretty soon, it won't be me.

CHAPTER 14



HENDRIX

So are you ready to tell me what happened Saturday night with Bolt?"

"A mistake is what happened." Skipper all but slams my Monday morning grande on the corner of my desk and turns to leave.

"He just seemed so aloof and downright belligerent," I say, hoping the comment will draw her out of her uncharacteristic reticence. Skipper once told me about a threesome she had in the botanical gardens. A woman who will copulate with a dude and a chick behind a bush is not what I'd call circumspect. Skipper pauses on her way to the door, turning to look at me, chagrin smeared in shades of shame all over her face.

"I don't know what came over me." She stomps back into my office and flops into the chair across from my desk.

"Oh, do take a load off. Not like I have work to do or anything."

"You asked and now I'm telling you." She runs a hand over her eyes wearily. "It was like a wild animal took over my body."

"If this story gets bestial or even anal in nature, I'm good on the details. You can keep 'em."

"Would you stop joking?" she asks, even though her lips twitch. "I'd never felt that way before. Especially not for someone shorter than me. Ewww."

"Nothing wrong with short men. I've fucked a short man with a big dick. An excellent redistribution of inches if you ask me. Height won't make you come."

"You didn't say that when you smashed that basketball player

who was a good six seven."

"Chile, I slept with that man *thrice*, but I deeply regret it because it was mid every time. I just kept *trying*, though. Kept hoping it would get better. A man that big, it just *had* to be better."

"When we first met him, you said he had BDE."

"He got the B and the D but no E. Dick included. Energy sold separately. I was like, bruh, you working with all them inches, and I still got to rub it out with the Rose when you leave? Sir, you are redundant."

"You really have no shame, do you?" Skipper giggles.

"Says the woman who slept with a man she was actively combative to three seconds after meeting him. And in the women's bathroom no less."

She covers her face and screeches, "It was unisex!"

"Now, you know I stay out your business."

"That's a lie." Skipper parts her fingers, allowing space for one eye to glower at me. "You always in my business."

"At least tell me if it was good because I have to know what he is packing under that bow-tie."

The barest hint of rose crawls over Skipper's cheeks in a light-skinned blush. "It was surprisingly satisfying given the… quickness of it all and that he repulses me in every nonsexual way."

"Did you come?"

"Yes."

"Then your pussy must like him, even if you don't."

"Hendrix, please," she groans. "Don't remind me I slept with a man who insulted me as soon as we met."

"You gave as good as you got."

"What'd you hear?" she demands sharply.

"Nothing. I don't mean sexually. I meant banter, sparring. Ya know, verbally and upright, not on your knees in a unisex bathroom."

"Oh, my God. When did I tell you that?"

"Not until just now." I chuckle. "Has he called? Have you?"

"No. It's like nothing happened." She might try to hide her disappointment, but I know her too well.

"He'll call," I tell her gently, not sure I can make that promise with any certainty, but wanting a return of her usual spark.

"I really don't care." She stands and walks toward the door. "Don't forget your favorite housewife is calling at noon after your

meeting with the network."

Technically Imani Jo is an ex-wife, but the drama surrounding her divorce from the NFL player is what landed her on the show in the first place.

"We're just back-to-back today." I press my fingers to my temples, preemptively massaging the pain Imani always gives my head. A pain in my ass, too. "I'll be ready. Could you close the door? I need to focus on the contract we're discussing before this call."

I dig into the details and red line the changes we need to make to the agreement. Changes the network must have known I would demand.

"Y'all really tried it, though." I chew the tip of my pen and shake my head. "Playing in my face and pissing me off. Oh, I'm 'bout to get this bag for real."

My phone screen lights up on my desk with an incoming text. I nearly drop the pen when I read Maverick's name.

My fingers creep toward the phone like it might bite me if I get too close too fast. I slide the phone to the edge of the desk so I can read the message.

> **Maverick:** Thought these might be of interest to you.

My breath hitches when I see it's a link to in-person Alzheimer's support groups in the Atlanta area.

> **Maverick:** I know you said you'd be staying in Charlotte while your aunt recovers from her surgery, so here's a list of virtual ones I found, too. My mom did those when she didn't feel like going out.

I stare at the message, at his name. My fingers freeze around the phone, tightening with the effort of not hurling it across the room to get it as far away from me as I can. To get *him* as far away from me as I can. I cannot bond with him this way. I can't connect to him. Like each conversation, each text message is a thread strung between us that slowly, inexorably pulls me closer. It's not his chest, ripped and muscled. Not that dark gold of his skin or that protractor-perfect jawline. It's not his wealth or power. His

kindness, his consideration, his caring is the lure. I've been on plenty of dates where men pretended to listen long enough to get in my bed, but probably couldn't tell you one real thing about me beyond that I have a glamorous job and give good head.

This is not that. I know it's not.

> **Maverick:** You may see this message later. I know you're busy. It's not hard information to find, but sometimes when we have a lot going on, we just don't occur to ourselves. And a friend sending you something you could have easily found on your own prompts you to act.

A line of bubbles starts and stops on the screen, and it's hard to envision this powerful man unsure of the next thing to say, but I sense that in this, whatever bond we've formed in just a few conversations and text messages, he's as uncertain how to safely govern this as I am.

> **Maverick:** I know friends is a stretch since we've only been face-to-face twice, but I'm familiar with what you're navigating and am here if you need anything.

I caress the screen, moved by his sincerity, but firm my lips and straighten my shoulders.

> **Me**: Thank you so much for this. I'm going into a meeting, but wanted to let you know how much I appreciate your thoughtfulness. Have a good one.

That *have a good one* is how I shut shit down. That's my exit line and signals I'm done with this for now. I have to be done with this… with him for now. Maybe for good.

The way he made me feel Saturday night is dangerous. Not just the way his eyes flowed over my body, or the way I could feel him watching me throughout the event. There has been something inordinately intimate about every conversation we've had, even though there haven't been many. He has managed to peel a layer back each time, exposing what only a few people ever get to see.

I have goals. One of them is to EP my first show, Chapel's show. Moving into television and film is the next phase of my career, and I'm not squandering this opportunity, ruining it for a man who makes my heart race. I've seen too many women prioritize other people and sacrifice their own dreams. I see mothers do it all the time, further solidifying it couldn't be me. I've seen wives do it. I saw Soledad do it for years with her gutter-rat husband, Edward. Hell, I saw Mama do it with my father, neglecting many of the things she wanted to do for her small business to help him with his. I won't be led around by my heart and my pussy with some man holding the leash.

I take the screen dark, putting the phone away without waiting for his reply. My goals are the priority.

Nothing will make me lose sight of that.

My desk phone buzzing breaks the quiet of my resolve.

"Yeah, Skipper?"

"Got the network on the line," she says over speaker.

Sons of bitches trying to get over on my client.

"The hell you say," I mutter under my breath and press the button to pick up the call. "Gentlemen, let's discuss this contract."

By the end of the call, my blood pressure is probably through the roof, but I've gotten most of what I want. Some things they won't budge on and I can't blame them. Imani thinks that her on-screen diva persona works everywhere, but I got a wake-up call for her. It doesn't always work in the boardroom.

"So did you shove it all the way up their ass?" Imani asks when I call after the network conversation. "That ridiculous offer?"

"It got pretty far up the ass," I answer breezily. "Not far up enough to feel good."

"Oooh, I like that analogy. My last boyfriend taught me everything I know about prostate orgasms. Most men are really missing out. The gays know. If you tap that button, he going off, honey. We used a dildo because I couldn't imagine my finger in his booty hole. I mean, that's where he shits. I could have used a latex glove, but he—"

"Can we, um, stop this line of… of talk?" I practically beg.

I thought *I* had no filter, but Imani is the gold medalist of mouth diarrhea, which is why she shines on reality television.

"But I was just sharing—"

"Too much," I tell her, allowing a bit of humor into my tone to

remove the sting. “I promise you I don’t want to hear about you sticking your finger up nobody’s ass unless you’re sitting on Andy Cohen’s couch telling a million other people and we’re both getting paid for it.”

“Whew, chile,” Imani cackles. “That’s why I love you, Hennessy. You don’t pull no punches.”

I’ve gotten used to the nickname. Considering how much money this woman stands to make if we steer her career properly, I’ll tolerate a corny moniker if it means a hefty commission.

“We got most of what we wanted,” I tell her. “But there were a few sticking points they won’t yield on.”

“Like what?” Her gum chewing on the other line escalates, which is always my gauge for how close we are to a meltdown. “It better not be the wardrobe allowance. I’m on TV and have an image to maintain. If they think I’m—”

“They are fine with a modest wardrobe allowance, but the thing they can’t really budge on is you not being filmed with half the cast members.”

“But I hate them.” The gum smacking increases, popping like bullets at a shooting range. “That’s not just for the cameras. I legit can’t stand them two-faced bitches.”

“They’re aware. That’s kind of the point of the show.” I explain what should already be self-evident. “That’s why they put you guys in these situations where you’re bound to attack each other. It’s good television. If you don’t give them that, you may as well leave the show.”

“Leave the show?” she screams, gum popping halting altogether. “I built that show. Folks are tuning in to see *me*, not them gully ex-stripper hos.”

I don’t point out that she got her start on the pole because who cares. She was once a diamond in one of Atlanta’s elite strip clubs. She grew up hard, and audiences want to find any grime that’s left under her newfound glitter.

“I’ve reduced your on-air time with the cast members you specified,” I tell her, trying to keep us on course. “And the producers have agreed to integrate your new sex toy business into the show.”

“Oh, yes! I’ll make sure the team has Issa Vibe ready to go in time for filming the new season so we can time our launch with episode one. That was a great suggestion, by the way.”

“I’m glad. The producers love bringing in that storyline so it’s win-win.”

“And did you like my gift?” she asks, a salacious note slinking into her voice.

“The vibrator?” I come close to a guffaw. “I haven’t tried it yet, but I’ll let you know.”

“We call it the Roll Back because it’s gonna make your eyes roll back in your head.”

“Could we focus on business for another second? I know it’s a foreign concept, but some clients don’t share this much sexual information with their managers.”

“That don’t sound fun at all,” she bemoans on their behalf. “We not like them.”

God, I wish we were.

I manage to redirect the conversation long enough to get her agreement on the terms as I’ve negotiated them. I don’t have a law degree, but I have my doctorate in relentless bitch. I know what my clients want and deserve and won’t stop until they get as much as possible. The lawyer I keep on retainer gets into the legal details and makes sure we’re crossing and dotting and not leaving cash on the table.

Three phone calls and two video conferences later, I welcome the shifting light of sunset in my office. Finally this day is over, and I can go home. I’m packing up for the night when my resolve not to see if Maverick replied weakens. I reach into the top drawer of my desk for my cell phone. Probably half a dozen messages have come in since I started my meeting marathon.

No messages or missed calls from Aunt Geneva, to my relief. Some memes and GIFs on my thread with Soledad and Yasmen, which makes me smile. A text from Nelly to Kashawn and me about an “out-of-the-box” founder she wants to discuss tomorrow. There’s even a message from a one-minute man I had the misfortune of smashing last month. I was tempted to notify *Guinness* we had a new world record for fastest to come with complete disregard for his partner’s pleasure, but I figured they’re flooded with women claiming that daily.

Delete. Block. Never again.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice… well that ain’t happening.

There’s even a message from Imani.

Imani: I know I'm a lot, but I love you and appreciate all the hustling you do for me, Hennessy. I have three tickets to the Waves game in San Diego next Wednesday. It's the Western Conference playoffs! I have an event I can't get out of, so they're all yours if you want them.

I already know Soledad and Yasmen won't be able to fly off to Cali in the middle of the week with their commitments. They'd be my first choice as plus-ones for this event, but I have a lot of good second ones.

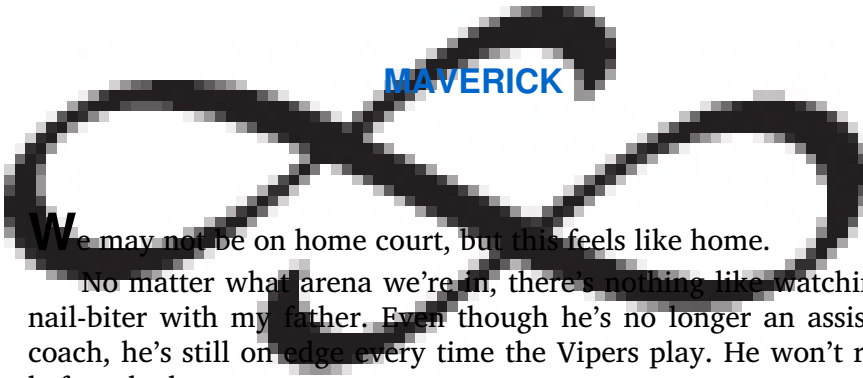
Me: Would love to get out of the city for a night. Send deets to Skipper.

Finally, I come to a new message from the almost-billionaire I'm avoiding.

Maverick: You have a good one, too.

I don't think his "have a good one" means the same as mine. Mine is a dismissal, a way to shut things down. When Maverick says have a good one, I think he really hopes I do.

CHAPTER 15



MAVERICK

We may not be on home court, but this feels like home.

No matter what arena we're in, there's nothing like watching a nail-biter with my father. Even though he's no longer an assistant coach, he's still on edge every time the Vipers play. He won't relax before the buzzer.

"What's Paulson thinking?" Pop grits out, standing so close to the plexiglass of the luxury suite box his breath fogs it up. "He needs to switch forty-three. He can't guard August West, and that boy's gonna drain threes all night if we let him get hot."

It's great seeing my father reinvigorated in a way he hasn't been since we lost my mother. Losing her was the earthquake that shook and destroyed his foundation. At first he didn't even try to dig himself out from under the rubble. With the possibility of me owning the team he's devoted so much of his life to, it seems like he's finally starting to reemerge.

Improbably, the Vipers are in the Western Conference playoffs, thanks mainly to the president of basketball operations, who came to my father on the low seeking advice the last few years. He followed Pop's recommendations on a new head coach, how to take advantage of a few high-draft picks and trades in the offseason. The results? Vegas Vipers versus the San Diego Waves in a franchise-defining series.

I'm definitely tuned into the game, but I have a broader agenda tonight. Being here in this box is a strategic show of intention and strength to Andy Carverson, the current majority owner of the Vipers and part of the good ol' boy network that blocked my

father's aspirations at every turn. I'm here to remind him that soon I'll be calling the shots as the new majority owner. That I—the kid who used to collect dirty towels and pass around Gatorade and do whatever grunt work they found for me—am going to buy the team that has been in his family for decades right from under him.

He's mismanaged the organization and he's mismanaged his money. The man is not poor by any means, but the Vipers are now valued in billions, not millions. Publicly, Andy claims he simply wants to free up some of his holdings so he can reallocate funds for his family's estate planning. Privately, it's a different story. He's still worth more than 99 percent of the world's population will see in a lifetime, but wealth is relative. Tying up this much money is a luxury when there are other investments that could make him more money faster and easier.

I bided my time, getting my finances in order so that when the perfect moment presented itself, I'd be ready. Selling the True Playahs app wasn't a difficult decision. It was a calculated one that I'd been planning for years. This team, my father's legacy, was the endgame. And none of the people who stood in his way will stand in mine.

The door to the suite opens and Andy Jr. walks in, looking ridiculous wearing a Vipers jersey over his dress shirt and pants. How a man who lives in Vegas has a complexion so devoid of color has always mystified me. He's so pale, you'd think he lives in Alaska.

"Christopher," Andy says, extending his hand to my father first with false deference. "So good to see you."

Assessing Andy shrewdly, Pop extends his hand after a slight hesitation. "AJ, how you doing?"

He's been calling Andy that since he was a college student. He knows it gets under the other man's skin.

"I'm good," Andy replies through a tight smile. He can only fake humility for so long before his privilege starts to show. "Glad to see you."

He turns his attention to me. "Checking out the investment, Mav?"

"Just enjoying the game." I gesture to the buffet of food laid out and the fully stocked bar. "Can I offer you anything?"

"I have my own box," he replies testily. "And my own food. I just wanted to come by and say hello."

“Ahhh, of course.” I walk over to the bar and grab a bottle I brought in myself just for him. “Have a drink with me, though?”

“Is that…” He frowns at the red bottle of liquor I’m holding. “Is that Macallan 60?”

“It is.” I reach for a glass. “Maybe one drink.”

I can tell he wants it. One bottle from the Macallan Red Collection—sixty years old, sixty thousand dollars, and goes down smooth as silk. I’m not one to toss my weight around, to intimidate people with wealth… unless they need reminding, and if there’s ever anyone who needed reminding that our positions in this game have swapped since I was the kid scurrying around the stadium, and he was his daddy’s favorite, it’s this man right here.

“Like I said,” Andy replies, his voice as sharp as his jaw. “I have my own box. We’re close to wrapping things up, I think. Just remember you may become the majority owner, but the deal is contingent on my continued involvement and a seat on the board.”

“Why do you feel the need to remind me of that?” I ask, allowing a small smile. “You’ve stipulated it since the beginning of our negotiations. I’ve never had a problem with it.”

At least not one that I’ve voiced to him. Of course I’d rather evict him from the organization altogether. He and the friends he’s entrenched in the leadership and front office are the reason the Vipers had back-to-back losing seasons in the past. I will change that. And to rub it in their faces, I’ll use my father to help me do it.

“Just making sure,” Andy replies, adjusting the knot of his tie beneath the jersey. Goofy shit. “I better get back to my box. My family’s there.”

You mean the wife you cheat on and your kid who periodically posts on social media how much she despises you? I’m sure they’re waiting with open arms.

“Thanks for coming by,” I say instead and proffer the Macallan 60 again. “Sure you don’t want one for the road?”

“Uh, no,” Andy answers tersely. “We’ll talk soon. Enjoy the game. I think we might pull this one out.”

Once he leaves, my shoulders relax and the fist in my pocket unclenches. My body always reminds me that man is not to be trusted.

“’Bout damn time he cleared out,” my father mumbles into his beer, eyes still trained on the court.

The door to the box opens and I turn, prepared to ask Bolt what

took him so long. He saw an old classmate and went down to meet him. He knows I would have been fine if he'd invited him up to the box, but Bolt is very discreet. Most of his friends don't even know he works for me. I'm not someone who flaunts and neither is he. Zere's penchant for flaunting, for making sure everyone knew what she had, what I had, is one of the things I don't miss about our relationship.

When Bolt walks in, he's not alone.

"Kenan fucking Ross," I say, a wide smile breaking out over my face. "Bruh, what's up?"

The retired future Hall of Famer gives me dap, towering over me by a good five inches and over Bolt by even more.

"Ran into this one," Kenan says, his smile white against his brown skin. "And he thought you wouldn't mind seeing your boy."

My assistant and I share a lightning-quick glance. If Bolt brought Kenan to me, he probably sees an angle that I don't recognize yet, but will soon.

"Chill with us for a bit." I gesture to the oversized leather captain seats facing the game. "Come watch the Vipers whip your team's ass."

Kenan sketches a good-natured grin and sits. "We both know that ain't happening tonight."

I glance meaningfully from the tied score displayed on the board to the ex–power forward who ended his storied career in a Waves uniform.

"Just watch." Kenan crosses one long leg over the other. "West'll come out blazing after the half."

"We'll see." I shrug a little too casually. "Not like I have an actual dog in the fight."

Kenan Ross's basketball IQ is legendary, and it's matched by his astuteness off the court.

"That's not the word on the street," he says, sliding me a shrewd glance.

"What you hear?" I ask.

"My sources tell me you're buying the Vipers."

"Hmmm." My monosyllabic grunt is all he's getting for now. "Are those the same sources that tell me you're in the market for ownership, too?"

"Not majority stake. Too rich for my blood, but I never tried to hide that I wanted more skin in the game." Some of his humor

fades. “This is our game. With all the brothers we have playing, I want to see more of *us* in front offices, leading organizations and owning teams.”

“Agreed. So you got your eye on a piece of the Waves?”

“I’m working on something, but I have a feeling my path is a lot easier than yours. They don’t just give majority ownerships away. And I ain’t talking about money.”

“If it were easy, more of us would do it. Most of the shit I’ve done hasn’t come easy.”

“You ready to deal with Andy Jr. and them good ol’ boys?”

“The better question is are they ready to deal with me?” I keep my face neutral until Kenan chuckles and shakes his head, prompting me to yield a matching smile.

“Let me know if I can help,” he says.

“Same. If there’s anything I can do, just let me know.”

“I better get back down there.” Kenan stands and so do I. “My wife and her cousin are courtside.”

“That’s August’s wife, right?”

“Yup. Iris has their two kids with her and Lotus has our little girl. It’s a full-on estrogen production and I needed a break,” he says, belying the words with a proud grin. “But my wife is not above coming to find me if I’m gone too long.”

“Give them both my best,” I say, walking him to the exit of the box.

Once the door closes behind him, I turn to find Bolt watching me. We say a lot without words for a few seconds before he finally breaks the silence.

“We should keep him close,” Bolt says. “He could help down the road.”

“Agreed.” I pat his shoulder approvingly. “Thanks for bringing him by.”

I walk over to stand by my father at the glass.

“Game’s tied,” he says, eagerness lighting his face. “Paulson’s doing pretty good tonight. The guys are holding their own.”

“I’m glad. The less of a mess we have to clean up when we get there, the better.”

“Fuck outta here,” my father yells, pounding a fist to the plexiglass. “Did you see that? Offensive foul? I could make a better call blindfolded! You gotta be…”

He rubs a hand over his mouth and expels his annoyance in a

harsh breath.

"And you know West ain't gon' miss," I say, watching one of the league's brightest players take his spot at the free-throw line.

But he does miss.

"Ball don't lie," my father crows. "That's what you get for that shit call."

West does make the second shot, but there's no time to do more than a full-court throw before the buzzer sounds to end the first half.

It's a huge game. We, the underdog of the playoffs, are the only thing standing between the Waves advancing toward their first championship. They'd still have to beat the Eastern Conference champ, but neither of the two teams fighting it out on the other side of the country match well against West and the Waves. This is game two. We lost the first game, but if we can steal this one on their home court before we head back to Vegas for game three, our odds get better.

Nobody believes the Vipers can pull it off, but the arena is packed with people who want to watch us try. A game like this draws lots of celebrities wanting to see and be seen in their floor seats. Ironically, most of the ones who make it to the jumbotron were at our last party in Miami.

"What's she doing here?" Bolt blurts, his tone sharp with something that sounds like excitement. He joins us and presses his palm flat to the plexiglass.

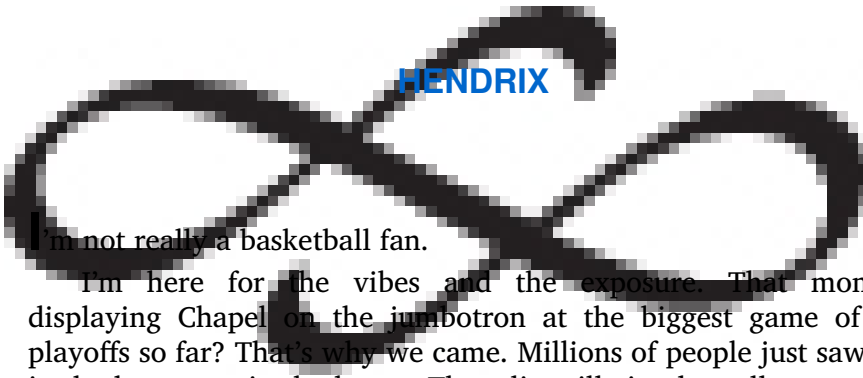
I follow his line of vision to the jumbotron. The camera is focused on Chapel, who blows a kiss and uses her beer to toast the cheering crowd. Seated to Chapel's left is Skipper, who grins and flashes a peace up, A Town down. That's the "she" in Bolt's question, but I'm much more interested in the woman seated to Chapel's right.

Hendrix isn't looking at the camera, seemingly unaware or uncaring about her companions' on-screen byplay. She's frowning down at her phone, one corner of her mouth trapped between her teeth. Her hairstyle is different from the last time I saw her. It's that Zoë Kravitz-esque combination of loose hair and braids. Some is gathered into a knot atop her head and the rest rains over her shoulders and arms. She's wearing dark jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with *Dark & Lovely* in sparkling letters. With her head bent and fingers flying over the keypad, she looks like she'd rather

be somewhere else.

I should give her somewhere else to be.

CHAPTER 16



HENDRIX

I'm not really a basketball fan.

I'm here for the vibes and the exposure. That moment displaying Chapel on the jumbotron at the biggest game of the playoffs so far? That's why we came. Millions of people just saw her in the best seats in the house. That clip will circulate all over social media for days. The sports pundits on TV probably identified her as the current "it" girl who won the model competition *Lewks*. They're sharing her backstory, commenting on the "unlikely" victory of a woman with vitiligo winning a beauty competition. All going according to plan.

In my peripheral vision, Chapel blows a kiss to the camera, clouds of pink champagne spilled across her brown skin. Her hair has been cropped close and dyed strawberry blond. On-screen she is a tableau of vibrant colors and contrasts, a bird of paradise in full bloom. All eyes on her tonight could translate to my phone ringing off the hook tomorrow. We haven't landed a cosmetic contract yet. That's my personal goal; for a makeup company to want her, not to cover up her vitiligo, or to say she's beautiful in spite of it, but to look for ways to highlight that she's beautiful *because* of it. One of them could see her tonight on the biggest stage in sports, not just holding her own, but holding the world rapt.

So I endure two hours of a game I'm not particularly interested in.

I'm playing on my phone when the text message comes over.

Maverick: Wordle? Animal Crossing? What's so good on

that phone you couldn't be bothered to smile for the cameras?

I look up, glancing around the arena, but I don't see Maverick anywhere. Realistically, it's a sold-out crowd of thousands, so no surprise there.

Maverick: Look higher.

I let my gaze roam until I find the luxury boxes that ring the upper level of the arena. In one of them, I barely make out Maverick standing beside his assistant, Bolt, and a man taller than the two of them.

Me: Candy Crush actually.

Maverick: I have a box.

Me: I see that.

Maverick: Come up.

He's really saying *come see me*, which I definitely should not do.

Me: I think we're fine down here with the common folks.

Maverick: Common folks, my ass. Your seats are $25,000 a pop. Probably cost more than this box.

My brows stretch to my hairline, shock freezing my fingers over the keypad for a second. I knew these were fantastic seats when Imani offered them, but I didn't realize they were *that* good. She probably didn't either since they were gifted to her.

Me: Nothing but the best for my girls ☺

Maverick: I think you should come up here if only so we

can observe my assistant and yours insult each other for thirty seconds before sneaking off to fuck like wildebeests in some dark corner.

Bolt didn't call Skipper and she didn't call him. Though it was a strange encounter, I could tell she was disappointed he never reached out at all.

"Ladies, one of my friends has a box," I say, leaning forward to look at Chapel and Skipper. "And invited us to come up. You interested?"

"Hell, yeah." Chapel grabs her small YSL bag. "I know they got better food and superior liquor."

"You're probably right." I laugh.

Me: Tell me how to get there. We're on our way.

Maverick: I was hoping you'd say that.

Ten minutes later, I'm asking if this was a good idea. Putting myself in closer proximity to one of the most charismatic, intelligent, successful… and dammit fiiiine men I've ever met makes no sense when he's strictly off-limits. When indulging the attraction could derail my goals. I'm still reciting this mantra to myself when the elevator arrives at the box floor and the doors open.

"Who's this friend, by the way?" Skipper asks. "I didn't bother to…"

Her words trail into astonished silence when we come face-to-face with Bolt as soon as we step off the elevator. A muscle ticks in his jaw and his posture is stiff—shoulders tight and hands shoved into pockets of flawlessly tailored slacks. Tonight's bow tie is pin-striped. Skipper's steps halt beside me and she growls under her breath.

"Ms. Barry," Bolt addresses me, not looking at Skipper. "This way. Mr. Bell is waiting for you."

Skipper grabs my elbow and hisses in my ear. "I'm gonna piss in your coffee tomorrow. You coulda told me."

"And miss this reaction?" My chuckle is low, my amusement is high. "No way."

When we step into the luxury box, Maverick's back is to me. He

and the other man I spotted from the floor face the plexiglass. Even though the man stands a few inches taller than Maverick, I recognize the legacy of his strong shoulders and the proud set of his head in who I presume to be his son. They're deep in conversation, and when they turn their heads to speak to each other, their profiles are so similarly stark and strong and raw-boned, I'll eat my Louis Vuitton sneaker if they aren't father and son.

"Now this how we s'posed to be living." Chapel lets out a low whistle. "We shoulda been here all night."

Maverick turns to face us, and our eyes connect. The glance is as hot and quick as a drop of oil in a pan, but we both look away immediately. Maybe it just feels that way to me. Maybe all this unwanted awareness sparking between us lives only in my imagination.

I really hope so.

"Hendrix," Maverick says, walking over to us. "Good to see you again."

I summon a neutral smile that doesn't telegraph any of the *damn you look good* thoughts running through my mind. Standing tall in a black discreetly Gucci T-shirt that molds his powerful chest and biceps, dark jeans, and vintage J's, the man is gasp-worthy. It's not even how expensive he looks and smells. There's a magnetic field beneath that layer of class and sophistication that I have trouble resisting.

"Good to see you, too, Maverick. Thanks for the invitation." I gesture to my two friends. "You remember Chapel, of course. And my assistant, Skipper."

"This suite is amazing." Chapel inspects the luxurious leather seats, the well-appointed bar and bartender, the gourmet buffet. "You do it up, huh? Thanks for putting us on."

"It's good to have company," Maverick replies with an easy smile. "People have been coming and going all night."

"Who you pulling for?" Chapel asks.

"The Vipers. My dad worked with them for years so I grew up a fan." He turns to the man at the plexiglass. "Hey, Pop, come meet some friends."

Maverick's father isn't exactly a carbon copy of his son, but the resemblance is unmistakable. I tip my head back to meet his eyes, the same dark, microscopic-strength stare his son locks on you, though there is something distracted in his demeanor. Like it's a

habit to assess people, but he can barely be bothered anymore. Not rude, just like his mind is half somewhere else.

"Chris Bell," he says, evenly dividing a smile between Chapel, Skipper, and me.

After Maverick introduces us, his father makes a few minutes of small talk before walking back over to the plexiglass. It looks like the third quarter is getting underway, and Chris Bell watches with the air of a sentry on guard.

"Ladies, help yourself to anything you see," Maverick says. His gaze drifts to Bolt, who has made himself scarce and is standing by the bar. "I dare you to stump the bartender. He knows every drink you can imagine and some you've never heard of."

"I'd love to test that theory," Chapel says. "Let's get our drink on, Skipper."

Skipper eyes Bolt at the bar for a second before lifting her chin in a defiant angle and nods. "Pour it up."

As soon as she reaches the bar, she and Bolt glare at each other for a few seconds. I can't make out what they're saying, but judging by the growing surprise and then fascination on Chapel's face, they're insulting each other in some angry, arousing ritual like what we witnessed at the showcase.

"Told you it'd be fun," Maverick whispers to me.

My lips twitch, but I refuse to let my full smile out.

"They're still in the room," I tell him. "So maybe they'll be able to resist the weird urge to smash within a minute of seeing each other."

"I kinda hope they can't. I never have anything to tease Bolt about."

"Is he like your right-hand man?"

"Something like that." He shrugs.

"He seems…" I glance over to the bar where Bolt and Skipper are still snapping at each other, but now with mere inches separating their faces. "Intense."

"Not usually quite that intense, but your assistant brings out the worst, or at least the weird, in him."

Chapel's eyes bounce between them like she's watching a tennis match.

"I should go rescue Chapel," I say. "She has no idea how odd things could become in the next two minutes."

"And you need a drink," he agrees, walking with me toward the

bar. By the time we reach them, Bolt is grabbing Skipper's hand and dragging her from the suite, puffs of furious smoke practically coming off them both.

Maverick looks at me meaningfully with *I told you so* eyes.

"Okay, yes," I laugh. "You were right."

"What the hell did I just witness?" Chapel asks, looking toward the door that slammed behind Skipper and Bolt. "That was maybe the hottest thing I've ever seen that I didn't have to pay for."

"Unfortunately," I say, "we had a front-row seat for… that… the first time they met at the Aspire showcase."

"I wasn't sure if it would be as… that," Maverick gestures toward the door they just used to exit, "as last time, but it was."

"So they met where?" Chapel asks, a smile on her face even as her brows pinch the tiniest bit.

"Maverick and Bolt attended my venture capital fund showcase last week," I say.

"Ahhh." Chapel's unreadable expression catches my notice because her face is always completely open. I never have to guess what the woman is thinking, but now she is inscrutable in a way I have never seen before.

"You want a drink?" Maverick asks us.

"Yes, please," Chapel answers, smiling at the bartender. "Can you do a Lemon Drop?"

"In my sleep," he answers, shifting his attention to me. "And you?"

"French 75," I say.

"No Golden Cadillac this time?" Maverick asks, smiling.

"That was an unusual night." I pause to look down at the floor as the remembered stress of my mother's phone call tightens my middle again. "In a lot of ways."

"Any of those support groups appeal to you?" he asks, the teasing fading and replaced by concern.

"I haven't looked at any yet." I raise my hands in defense before he gets the chance to chide me. "I will. I promise."

"I didn't send those groups to give you one more thing to do. I wanted you to have the information at your fingertips when you're ready and need it."

"I know. Thanks again."

"How's your mother?" he asks.

"She's pretty good. I think I told you my aunt is having

surgery?" I wait for his nod and then go on. "That's not for several weeks, but I'll visit next week just to check on them."

"That's good." He grabs my hand and squeezes. "You're a good daughter."

That small encouragement draws a smile from me. He answers with a smile of his own, and we're not looking away when I'm sure we should be by now.

"Ahem." Chapel clears her throat pointedly and snaps a look between us. "Looks like our drinks are ready."

I drop Maverick's hand like a hot poker and force myself to concentrate on not liking him. Sure enough, all three drinks are lined up on the bar waiting. Chapel grabs her Lemon Drop and hands my French 75 to me.

"You ladies grab something to eat if you want to." Maverick gestures to the table laden with food. "Lemme see if Pop needs something stronger than that weak beer he's had for the last hour."

As soon as he leaves the bar, Chapel grabs my wrist and tugs me a few feet away.

"What's going on, Hen?" she whispers, searching my face in the discreet lighting of the luxury box.

"Um, what do you mean?"

"I mean…" She glances over her shoulder, presumably to make sure we're not being overheard. "With Maverick Bell."

I feel my face shutter. I know my lips pinch and the muscles of my shoulders tighten. I'm like a turtle crawling into my shell to protect myself from attack. It's not an attack, though. It's a question layered with concern. Nothing close to the inquisition my body is processing it as.

"Nothing's going on." I shrug and take a sip of my drink. "You know we met at the party."

"You mean at Zere's party?" She drops Zere's name as if reminding me of her existence.

"Of course at Zere's party. What are you implying?"

"I met him at the same time you did, but somehow he's been to Atlanta to see you since."

"Not to see *me*. To attend Aspire's showcase."

"And apparently you're texting each other now?"

"He sent me some support groups. You remember that night he mentioned his grandfather had Alzheimer's, right?"

"I remember." Compassion softens her expression for a second

before she goes on. “And now he’s inviting you up to his luxury box like you’ve been besties for years?”

“It’s not like that.” I sneak a glance at Maverick with his father. They’re both kind of yelling at the glass now that the game is underway and not going favorably for the Vipers, judging by their reactions. “He’s just been nice.”

“There’s something happening under the surface,” Chapel says. “At least it feels that way. The two of you talked like I wasn’t there.”

“That’s bad manners,” I joke. “Not… not anything else.”

“For the sake of the show, it can’t be anything else, Hen. It’d be hella awkward if you start something with the man our producing partner is actually still in love with.”

“It would be, which is why I’m not starting anything.” I pause. “Not that I want to start anything.”

“Just be careful, okay? Don’t cross any lines with him.”

“I won’t.” I rush the words out. I really want to drop this, especially with Maverick in the room.

“Okay,” Chapel says, glancing down at her phone and sounding a little distracted. “Oh, wow! You remember Kyra?”

“Is that the model who was dismissed in the semifinal round on *Lewks*?”

“Yup.” Chapel slides her phone into the pocket of her miniskirt. “That rapper she’s dating, Big Jeezy, has a box. She saw us on the jumbotron and wants me to swing by to say hi. You wanna roll?”

Maverick approaches, and I return his smile.

“It would be rude for me to leave now,” I tell her. “Especially with Skipper still MIA.”

“That girl is MI*F*. Missing in Fucking, but aight.” Chapel sets her empty glass down on the bar. “I’m gonna go holla at Kyra, but I’ll be right back.”

Maverick arrives at my side as Chapel leaves.

“Other plans?” he asks, nodding to the door closing behind Chapel.

“One of her friends has a box, too, so she’s just popping in to say hi.”

“Got it.” He turns his back to the bar and leans his elbows on the surface, a stout glass held in one hand. “So we talked with Hue this week.”

“Oh, I’m aware.” The tension that built inside of me as soon as

he approached loosens at the prospect of discussing one of Aspire's founders. "To say they're excited about you getting involved is an understatement."

"We're excited, too. I'm always looking for investments, but especially since I sold the True Playahs app."

"That was a huge risk, yeah? Selling what was kind of the cornerstone of your business." I toast him with my French 75. "Cheers to that kind of confidence."

He grins and shrugs. "In this game you have to be, especially as a Black man moving in these circles. I ain't waiting for nobody to tell me I'm the shit. You better know it going in."

"Oh, I get that. We gotta build ourselves up. And well, I have my girls. My friends always got my back and remind me who the hell I am if I forget."

"I like you, Hendrix." He says it without a smile, in a way that sounds earnest and real and not like he's saying something to fill the space. He doesn't take it back or explain it away, but forges on. "The kind of confidence that you exude is magnetic. You know that?"

I stare at him, my lips wrestling in the battle between a smile and a scowl. He shouldn't be saying this shit to me, even though it's presented as if it's perfectly harmless. I know better. I know those are the kinds of words that cling to the inside of your mind and play on repeat when you're drifting off to sleep.

He takes another draw from his drink, watching me over the rim of the glass. He seems completely comfortable with the silence that builds and tightens like air being blown into a tiny balloon. He's unafraid of the pop, but my muscles tense with the threat of it; the destruction. I need to distract myself. Now.

"I wanted to ask about one of your 'risky' investments," I say, forcing myself to meet his gaze again. "You mentioned that you've invested in cannabis before."

"Still do." He straightens and sets the glass on the bar, an alertness replacing the languor from before. "What's up?"

"Nelly and Kashawn approached me with something they termed 'out of the box.' Something we've never done before, but they want us to consider. Or at least one company they want us to consider, but it's a vice industry."

"There's restrictions on those." He frowns, his dark, thick brows bunching. "They can be a little tougher, but I'm familiar with the

ins and outs if you need any help. What aspect of cannabis? A grower, a dispensary, an app? What we talking about?"

"It's a grower, but she has ideas that are more scalable." I grin and shrug a little sheepishly. "The extent of our knowledge doesn't go beyond smoking it."

"Funny," he says, but there's an inward concentration to his expression that may mean his wheels are spinning.

"We just want to know a little more about the business. Nelly feels strongly that we should give this woman a chance, but we've focused a lot more on tech-enabled companies."

"That all makes sense. I definitely take a risk investing in growers, but it's not as much about ROI for me. The prohibition of cannabis has done a lot of harm specifically to our community. I want to assist marginalized entrepreneurs who have been historically disenfranchised by legislation designed just as much to target us as it was to protect anyone else."

"That's a really restorative approach," I say approvingly.

"Absolutely. The system criminalized activity around this drug in a way that disproportionately prosecuted Black people. Why not flip the script now that it's legal and use it to create generational wealth in our community, for our families? Close some of the gaps created by the shit we had to put up with since we got here."

"Amen to that."

"Cannabis has now been classified as a less-addictive drug. NBA players used to be penalized, suspended for it, and now the league has reached an agreement to allow it. Baseball, hockey, and football had already made that adjustment."

"I heard that, and couldn't help but think about how Iverson caught a case way back in the day for weed."

"Exactly. Ricky Williams lost a whole season of football because of it, but times have changed. Hell, one state recently issued mass pardons to those doing time for marijuana-related charges. As legalization spreads, so does opportunity. We need to take advantage of that."

He slides his hands into his pockets and rocks a little on his heels, eagerness radiating from every pore. And I realize that money is like a playground for him; investments an adventure.

"I got an idea," he says.

"Famous last words?" I set my empty glass on the bar and signal the bartender for another.

“No, famous first ones.” He levels a look on me that tells me we’re headed for a bad idea. It’s full of challenge and maybe a little mischief. “Come with me to Colorado.”

“Um, no.” I was already questioning my wisdom coming to his box tonight. A road trip? No damn way.

“There’s a grower there who has branched out into more scalable efforts,” he continues. “A point-of-sale app similar to what she may be considering.”

“I don’t think—”

“Not just you, of course,” he cuts in, his smile knowing, like he read my mind at a glance; could see my thoughts. “Bring Nelly and Kashawn, too. I bet they’d love to meet this grower.”

He knew the buttons to push. Of course I wouldn’t want to refuse such an opportunity so perfect for what we’re considering out of hand, at least not without consulting my partners.

“Can I let you know in the next day or so?” I ask.

“Of course. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Shit!” Maverick’s father shouts, banging a fist on his leg. “What the hell? You can’t…”

He closes his eyes and rests his forehead against the plexiglass.

“We losing?” Maverick calls unnecessarily.

“We shouldn’t be,” his father spits. “We coulda had this. Maybe still could. I’mma go down.”

“Pop, stay outta Coach’s ear,” Maverick says, a warning note in his voice. “Our time is coming, but tonight—”

“I ain’t saying nothing to none of ’em,” Chris barks. He closes his eyes and purses his lips tightly, a man trying to hold his shit together if I’ve ever seen one. “I just need to be closer to the action. I wanna be down on the floor.”

“Gotcha.” Maverick nods, the tension around his mouth easing. “You know where the seats are.”

Chris shifts his gaze from his son to me and then back again. “You staying here?”

“For now, yeah,” Maverick says, not looking away from his father or at me. I wish I could pluck the words passing between father and son out of the air because they seem to be holding a silent conversation.

“All right.” Mr. Bell turns a charming smile on me and extends his hand. “Very nice to meet you. You’ll have to come back when there ain’t a playoff game on the line. I promise I’ll be more social

then."

"I understand." I take his hand and he gives it a little squeeze, his smile deepening before he lets go.

"Lemme get down here before the fourth quarter starts," he mumbles, heading for the door.

Bolt and Skipper pass him coming back in, looking slightly less disheveled than the last time. Bolt's bow tie is firmly in place, but the neat line of his clothing is disrupted by the pucker of a shirt hastily stuffed back into his pants. Skipper's blouse and jeans look as neat as they did before, but a red mark blooms at the side of her neck.

Maverick and I share a quick amused glance before schooling our faces into *we don't see nothing* neutrality.

"You're back," Maverick says smoothly with a gentle, discreet elbow in my side.

"Yeah, hi," I add, suppressing a grin. "The fourth quarter is just getting started."

They glare at our obviously fake blissful ignorance and then turn their glares on each other. When their eyes catch, something softens in their expressions. Only for a second, though, before Bolt turns away and marches over to the bar.

"Whiskey neat," he barks to the bartender.

Skipper watches his back, her lips trembling. When she looks at me, her eyes are wide like she's trying not to cry.

A low rumble of disapproval slips from my chest and I look at Bolt's back with daggers. It was cute when I thought Skipper was enjoying this, but if that motherfucker hurt my girl…

"Was that a growl?" Maverick asks, low-voiced.

"Check your boy. If he hurts Skipper—"

"He wouldn't." Maverick frowns. "Not like that. Never."

"If he hurts her in any way," I tell him. "His ass is mine."

"Protective, aren't you?" he smiles, admiration entering his eyes.

"Of my friends, yeah." I glance over to where Skipper stands, shifting from foot to foot awkwardly and shoving her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "We're gonna head out. I'll text Chapel to let her know."

I start off, but his hand on my elbow pulls me back, pulls me closer. The scent of good-smelling man suffuses the air around me, and I have to force myself not to burrow into Maverick's neck to

investigate further. He smells sexy and masculine and costly. It's good cologne and clean skin and him. His hand at my elbow stops me from walking away. I relish the hardness of his body pressed into me for a few seconds. Every one of my curves wants to mold to the unyielding lines of him.

Smells good. Feels good. Looks good.

Damn.

When I glance up, he's staring at me, nostrils flared like he's breathing me in as deeply as I'm breathing him.

This shit cannot happen.

I jerk my elbow away, and it breaks the spell—brings me back to my senses.

"You'll think about the trip to Colorado?" he asks, eyes falling to my mouth. I want to hide my lips from him because what if he's imagining how they would feel pressed to his, open under his. Because that's the rogue thought torturing my mind right now.

"I told you I'll ask Kashawn and Nelly." Tension laces my voice and I let out a sigh. I'm tired of trying not to be fascinated by and drawn to this man, but it's not a fight I can lose. There's too much at stake for my career and for Chapel's.

When I look back to Maverick there is a knowing there that makes me think maybe I'm not the only one tired of fighting.

"Sorry." I lick my lips and soften my tone. "Thank you for being willing to help us. If we're able to take you up on your offer, I'll reach out to Bolt and—"

"Reach out to me," Maverick says, a firmness in his words that I dare not dispute. "Directly."

Our eyes hold for a few seconds, and all the breath clogs in my chest. I can't breathe under the intensity of Maverick's dark eyes—of all that checked energy aimed at me.

I finally nod, drawing in a deep breath and releasing it on a whoosh.

"You ready, Skip?" I ask, crossing the room and looping my elbow through hers.

She glances over at the plexiglass where Bolt stands, back stiff, turned away from the room. At my words, he angles his head slightly as if waiting, listening for my assistant's response.

"Yeah," she snaps, eyes narrowed on Bolt. "Let's bounce."

Maverick's brows are raised just as high as mine and the speculation in the gaze he splits between our two assistants is just

as evident.

"Thanks again for inviting us, Maverick," I tell him, dragging Skipper toward the exit and not waiting for his response.

As soon as we're outside, Skipper's proud posture collapses and she drops her face into her hands.

"Oh, my God," she groans. "Why did I let that happen again?"

"And he got that neck good." I laugh a little, hoping to lighten her mood.

"What?" Her head snaps up. "What do you mean?"

I nod to the hickey she obviously doesn't realize is there. "You know that light skin of yours shows it all."

Her hands fly to both sides of her neck, eyes wide.

"I can't believe I'm this weak. He's not even that cute." She glances up, uncertainty on her face. "Is he?"

"I mean, he's not my type." I give her a small smile. "But I can understand his appeal. Give yourself a break. What's so bad about hooking up with a guy who obviously can't keep his hands off you? And you seem to be having the same reaction. I don't see the problem."

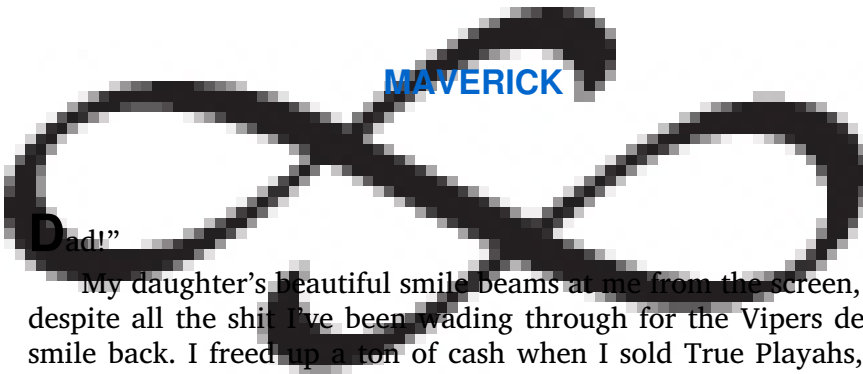
"The problem is he's an asshole."

"Oh, that." I chuckle. "Hey, the sex is good and you don't have to marry him. The two of you won't even see each other on a regular basis."

"I guess that depends on how regularly you and Maverick see each other." She gives me a pointed look. "Are we gonna talk about *that*?"

"Nah." My smile dissolves and I pull my phone out to text Chapel, dropping my eyes from the knowledge in hers. "We ain't talking 'bout that."

CHAPTER 17



MAVERICK

Dad!”

My daughter’s beautiful smile beams at me from the screen, and despite all the shit I’ve been wading through for the Vipers deal, I smile back. I freed up a ton of cash when I sold True Playahs, but part of my capital to purchase the team comes through financing. Dealing with the banks on such a mammoth venture and jumping through all the hoops the league requires when you buy a team is one of the most complex things I’ve ever navigated. Seeing Tamia, even if just on FaceTime, is a breath of much-needed fresh air.

“Baby girl.” I settle in behind my desk and give her my complete focus. “The globetrotter.”

“Look who’s talking,” she parries with a grin. “How long are you home this time?”

“Few days before I head back out.”

“How’s that empty nest treating you? You throwing any wild parties now that you ditched your kid?”

“You know I’d love to still have you here. You’re the one who insisted on leaving me as soon as you tossed your cap in the air graduation day.”

“I wanted to spend some time with Mom.” Her dark eyes, so like her mother’s, search mine. “You understand, right?”

“You know I do. I could fly out there, though, if you’re missing me too badly,” I offer hopefully.

“I do miss you,” she says, her tone careful. “But I think Mom really wants some time with just the two of us. Is that okay?”

“Of course it is,” I reply, making sure to hide my

disappointment. “She hasn’t had as much time with you as I have. You guys should catch up.”

When LaTanya decided to flee America a couple elections ago, I understood. Considering the mint she made when she sold her shares of True Playahs, she never has to work again and can live anywhere in the world. She chose Ghana and has dedicated her life to improving maternal mortality rates all over the world through the foundation she established a few years ago. We gave Tamia the option to move with her or remain in the States with me. I was fully prepared to split my time between the two continents if Tamia chose to live there, but she chose the States. Her best friends were here, and that became a deciding factor. We ensured she saw her mother whenever she wanted, but the day-to-day raising fell to me, and it was the greatest privilege of my life.

Also one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. Raising a young girl from the age of ten to a young woman aged eighteen as a single dad, not for the faint of heart.

“How’s Ghana?” I ask, letting the ache of missing my daughter settle like a cannonball in my chest.

“Great.” She gathers a fistful of her long braids. “Got my hair did immediately.”

“As usual.”

“And Ame, Mom’s new housekeeper, makes the best jollof. Like for real. I ask for it every day.” She leans forward on the teak dining room table, the ceiling fan whirring gently overhead. “Don’t tell Laurenz, but I think her cooking may even be better than his.”

I chuckle. “He’d be devastated, so I’ll keep that between us.”

“He probably doesn’t know what to do with himself only cooking for you now that Zere and I are both gone.” Tamia looks down at her fingers folded on the table before hazarding a glance back up at me. “I, um, saw the pics from the All-White Party in Miami. Looked fun as usual.”

“It was aight.” I lean back in my office chair and grimace. “You know that’s not my favorite thing to do.”

“But you did it for Zere,” she says, shooting me a speculative look. “How was that?”

I narrow my eyes at her. She may be LaTanya’s spitting image with her honey-brown skin and big, long-lashed doe eyes, but inside, she’s alarmingly like me. We haven’t discussed my relationship ending, though she knew about it weeks before our

press release.

"You know Zee and I parted on good terms, right?" I ask.

"Yeah, she told me."

"You guys talked?" I ask with a slight frown.

It's not that I mind. It just hadn't occurred to me. Zere and I dated for three years. When she moved in with me, she and Tamia became friends living under the same roof. She never postured herself as any kind of substitute for Tamia's mother, but she was a woman in the house, and that proved helpful when Tamia wanted to learn more about shopping, makeup, and stuff I was ill-equipped for. LaTanya was always present and active, but there were gaps from time to time, and over the last year or so, Zere sometimes stepped into them.

"Yeah, she wanted me to know that even though things ended with you guys," Tamia says, "she's still there if I need her."

"That was sweet," I say because it is. "How are you feeling about the breakup? I should have asked weeks ago, but you seemed okay with it, so I didn't dig."

"I mean, Zere's great, but I can't say I saw it lasting forever."

"Really?" Even though I'd reached the same conclusion and even expressed it to my father, I'd love to hear why my daughter believes it. "Why do you say that?"

"She just never seemed to quite fit." She shrugs. "I don't know how to explain it. Sometimes it felt like we had a guest in the house, not because she hadn't always lived there. Something just didn't feel like it connected between the two of you. Not that you didn't care about her, because I could tell you did. She just never seemed like *the one*. Ya know? And you deserve the one."

I smile. No matter what I accomplish or how much money I obtain, Tamia will remain the best thing I've ever done.

"Thank you, Tam." I force my smile away and try to look at her sternly. "Now don't think you're getting off this call without telling me when you're coming back to get ready for first semester."

"Yeah, about that…" She lays a pleading look on me, and I already know I won't like what's about to come out of her mouth. "I think I want to take a year off."

"Tam." I press one hand to my temple. "Everything is all set and ready to go."

"I'm not, Dad. I'm not all set and ready to go. I want to defer for a year."

“What?” I struggle to hold onto calm. “You’ve wanted to go to Stanford for as long as I can remember.”

“And I still do, but next year.” She sets her mouth into a familiar firm line. “You deferred a year.”

“Yeah, and I ended up never finishing.”

“No, you ended up receiving an honorary degree because you accomplished so much even without staying there four years.”

“You don’t know what you’re—”

“You’re right, Dad. I don’t know, so let me find out. Pop let you figure things out, defer a year. Do different things. Take some chances. Let me follow in your footsteps.”

“That’s just it. There *are* no footsteps. Just a whole bunch of false starts and stumbles and risks that I don’t want you to have to take.”

Over Tamia’s shoulder, I spot LaTanya walking past. The hell if I’m navigating this alone.

“LaTanya!” I call. “Could you come here, please?”

One of my best friends and the mother of my only child steps into view. Long braids flow down to her waist. Her honey-brown skin, the exact shade of Tamia’s, is flawless and unlined even as she just hit her forty-eighth birthday.

“You summoned?” she asks dryly, leaning over Tamia’s shoulder to catch my eyes on the screen.

“Have you heard your daughter’s plan to delay college?”

“I have,” she answers. “And can’t say I’m surprised. Why are you?”

I’m momentarily at a loss for words, but that doesn’t last long. Never does.

“What do you mean you’re not surprised?” I demand.

“She’s your daughter, Mav. What’d you expect, raising her the way you have? Letting her sit in on meetings, traipsing all over the world, giving her a front-row seat for all your business ventures and not expect it to shape who she is? What she wants from life? Of course she wants to invest in something like this.”

“Invest in…” My eyes ping between my daughter and LaTanya. “What investment?”

“Thanks, Mom,” Tamia mutters, rolling her eyes. “I hadn’t quite gotten to that part yet.”

“What investment?” I repeat.

“There’s a few pieces of property here I’m interested in buying,”

Tamia says. “Just some housing projects that—”

“Shit, Tam.” I huff out a breath. “Are you kidding me? You’re only eighteen.”

“You were only twenty-two when you launched True Playahs,” she points out.

“She’s right.” LaTanya smirks. “I was there.”

“The two of you are ganging up on me.” I shake my head. “I knew it was a mistake to let you spend the summer with your mother. She’s a bad influence.”

“Let?” Tamia asks. “I’m eighteen, Dad. The days of letting are done.”

“At least send the specs over,” I sigh. “Let me get Bolt on it. I want to know this is a good venture before you sink money into it.”

“Already have the figures pulled,” Tamia says. “Mom said you’d ask for that.”

“I’m that predictable, huh?” I ask, yielding a small crease of a smile.

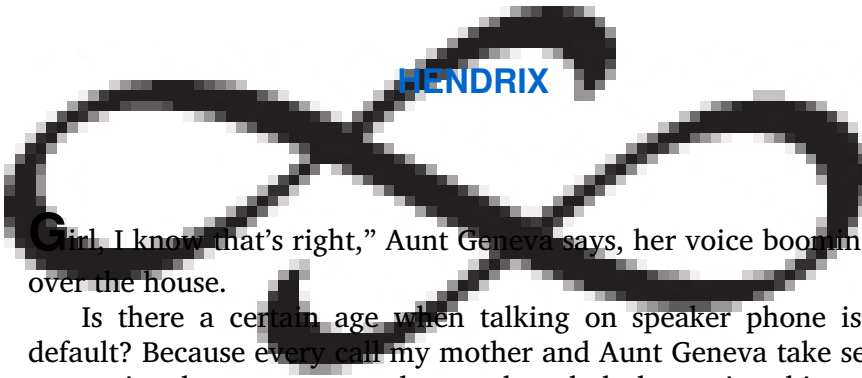
They both laugh and I give up trying to dissuade Tamia from the course she’s set. She is like me. Once we have something in our sights that we want, good luck convincing us we can’t have it.

For some reason, Hendrix Barry invades my thoughts, like she has so often since the night we met. The pull between us was even stronger at the Vipers game. With my rational mind, I know pursuing something with Hendrix would be awkward, but that same obstinate glint I see in my daughter’s eyes, I know it’s always in mine.

I’ve built my fortune on risks everyone told me weren’t worth taking. It’s honed my instincts so I know a good thing when I see it.

And Hendrix Barry is a good thing.

CHAPTER 18



HENDRIX

Girl, I know that's right," Aunt Geneva says, her voice booming all over the house.

Is there a certain age when talking on speaker phone is the default? Because every call my mother and Aunt Geneva take seems to require them to use speaker so the whole house is subjected to both sides of their conversation.

"Goodness gracious!" her friend cackles loudly from the other end. "I might have to run around the church on that one."

"God is good," Aunt Geneva says.

"All the time," her friend replies.

"And all the time," Aunt Geneva says.

"God is good," they finish together.

Though I'm not in church regularly anymore, it's a call-and-response script so familiar and somehow comforting, that I'm smiling as I review my schedule for the day on my iPad.

"All right, Hen," Aunt Geneva says, walking into the kitchen wearing leggings and a long T-shirt declaring *Virginia Beach Is for Lovers*. "I'm gonna head out to the store. Pick up some fish for dinner. You sure you'll be all right till I come back?"

"Aunt G, she's my mother," I say. "We'll be fine long enough for you to run to the store."

"Yeah, but a lot has changed. Make sure the locks are done up while you're on your calls. You know the code. Even with the doors locked, just to be safe, don't leave your keys out. Once the code wasn't set and she got out. Tried to drive. Got all the way to South Carolina."

“When? You didn’t tell me that.” I hear the accusation in my own voice and regret it immediately.

“Hendrix, now listen. I know you gotta be in Atlanta and your mama refuses to leave this house, so this is where we are for now.” Aunt Geneva bends one of those looks on me that, when I was a kid, seemed to see down to my very soul. Still does. “But I can’t waste time and energy I need to deal with all this making sure you know everything all the time.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s just hard not being here.”

“And it’s hard *being* here. Baby, it’s just hard.”

This constant state of vigilance is a lot for my aunt, and not for the first time, I wonder how sustainable this setup is, how long before we have to change things. Change is rarely easy. Now for Mama, it can be her worst nightmare, which also makes it mine.

“It’s gon’ be all right, though, Hen. God got us,” Aunt Geneva says with the ease of someone whose faith stands strong like the Rock of Gibraltar. She rifles through her purse. “You seen my keys?”

“I saw ’em on the bathroom sink,” Mama says from the kitchen doorway. “You going somewhere?”

How long has she been standing there and what did she hear?

“Just to make grocery,” Aunt Geneva says evenly, as if we weren’t just discussing Mama before she appeared. “I’ll be back. You need anything?”

“Salt-and-vinegar potato chips,” Mama replies and takes a seat at the kitchen table beside me.

“Now you know that ain’t good for you,” Aunt Geneva says. “How about some rice cakes?”

“Soon I won’t even know who I am,” Mama snaps with a rare flash of bitterness. “At least let me eat these potato chips while I still remember that I like them.”

It’s quiet in the small kitchen, save the whir of the refrigerator motor. My aunt seems at a loss for words, and I certainly don’t know what to say to that.

“I’mma pick up some of that kiwi you like,” Aunt Geneva replies after a few seconds. “Lemme go grab these keys so I can come back and make dinner.”

She exits the kitchen, leaving Mama and me alone. I arrived last night and in some ways, it feels like we don’t know each other well anymore. Of course, so much is changing for her and for me, too,

but it seems more fundamental than that. Like we're strangers who've been told we're to act like family. We've never had trouble finding things to talk and laugh about, but this new reality is proving even more complex than I'd anticipated.

I peer through the kitchen window to the badly neglected garden, which used to be Mama's pride and joy. Maybe getting back out there would give her something to focus on.

"What do you say we get out in the garden, Mama?" I turn to her with a smile. "Plant some of your favorite flowers. That might be fun."

"Sounds like work," Mama grumbles. "And it's hot. Like I want to get out in the fucking garden in July and work on some damn flowers."

Shock ripples over me. My mother never curses. I've never held back who I really am. I told her I lost my virginity in tenth grade and have not looked back. She knows that I pretty much only attend church when I come home for Christmas. Out of respect, I've never, as she would put it, "laid up with some man" in her house, and I check my expletives at the door. So to hear those words from her completely throws me off.

"Maybe later when it's cooler, Betty," Aunt Geneva says, watching us with one shoulder propped against the doorjamb.

"Fat bitch," Mama snarls at her sister, her eyes lit with sudden fury. "I told you to leave me alone."

"All right, now," Aunt Geneva says, folding steel into her soft words. "We talked about this. You not gon' cuss at me."

"I'll cuss at you if I want to." Mama stands abruptly and walks over to her sister, flicking her head to the side. "You blocking the door. Get out my way."

Aunt Geneva blinks rapidly and gulps, sure signs that she's on the verge of losing the tenuous hold on her temper. After a few seconds, though, she steps aside and allows Mama to leave the kitchen.

"What was that?" I ask when Mama's bedroom door snicks closed behind her. "Mama never—"

"You know folks with Alzheimer's can experience personality changes and mood swings," Aunt Geneva says. "It's not all the time, but it is sometimes. Your mama would never…"

She looks up at me, and the fatigue and the sadness lay a thin patina over the acceptance I've seen in her ever since she learned of

her younger sister's diagnosis. I walk over to her. I'm not sure if she takes me into her arms or I take her into mine, but our quiet sorrow wraps around us. Holds us both. There is a slow onslaught of terrible things ahead for us, for Mama. And on the good days, the days when she's lucid and barely changed, it's easy to forget. This condition metes out tragedy in small doses.

"You know your mama," Aunt Geneva finally finishes tremulously. "Hold on to that no matter how she seems or what happens. We know her and we love her. She loves us."

She glances at her watch. "It's three o'clock now. She can get a little agitated in the afternoons sometimes."

"Sundowning?" I ask, pulling from the things I've been reading. I've always wanted to know what my mother is experiencing, but there's been an increased urgency to understand ever since I found out Aunt Geneva needs me to be here while she recovers from surgery.

"I guess." Aunt Geneva adjusts the purse strap on her shoulder. "It gets worse in the middle and later stages, but yeah."

"Is Mama in the middle?" I ask softly.

"She's here right now." Aunt Geneva's steady eyes don't waver even though her response is not as certain as I had hoped. "That's all I know."

The low rumble of Aunt Geneva's Ford Explorer is just fading when the calendar alert on my phone jangles.

"Darn it. I forgot about this appointment."

Before my meeting with Nelly and Kashawn begins, I tiptoe upstairs and creak Mama's bedroom door open to check on her. She's fallen asleep with the pillow clutched to her chest on what used to be Daddy's side of the bed. Grief floods my heart for a moment, but I stave off that wave of loss. I can't afford it right now —not with Mama so fragile and Aunt Geneva about to have major surgery. I'm the one who needs to hold it all together. I cannot afford to fall apart.

Back in the kitchen, I pull the iPad from the bag at my feet and set it up on the table. Kashawn and Nelly are already on-screen when I log on.

"Ladies," I greet them with a genuine smile. Seeing their faces improves my mood. "What's up with you?"

"I'm on baby duty," Nelly says, sighing and holding her trusty fan up to her face. "Beth went for a walk. I keep forgetting to thank

you for those flowers, by the way, Hen. She loved them."

"Oh I'm glad," I say. "And how are things for you, Shawn?"

"Honey, slammed." Kashawn shoots a harried look at the camera. "I only have about five minutes to spare. I'm in court tomorrow and not as prepared as I need to be."

Nelly is the only one of us who works full-time with Aspire. Kashawn is one of Atlanta's best lawyers at a top law firm. We all have important things that require our attention, but we've nurtured Aspire because it means so much to each of us.

"The only thing I want to know is what time do we leave for Colorado in Maverick Bell's private plane?" Nelly asks, her face not giving away any of the humor that surely must lurk beneath the statement.

"You really want to go?" I ask weakly. I shouldn't be surprised, but I was kind of hoping they'd change their minds and turn Maverick's offer down.

"For one," Kashawn says, "it's exactly the kind of real-life example that will help us decide if we want to add a cannabis company to our portfolio."

"And for two," Nelly says, peeking out from behind her menopause fan, "building a relationship with a man of Maverick's means is never a bad idea."

"You're right, of course." I swallow the last of my reservations and realize it's useless trying to dissuade them from this trip.

"Good," Kashawn says. "Now, I better get. I'll be on the lookout for details."

"Same," Nelly says. A baby crying in the background has her rolling her eyes. "Dammit. I thought she'd stay asleep till Beth got home. Looks like I'm up. Peace, y'all."

"See you later," I say and sign off.

In the quiet house, there's nowhere to hide from the truth of my pounding heart, from the undiluted anticipation of seeing Maverick again on this trip. It's a secret thumping behind my ribs and running through my veins. As much as I told myself I hoped my partners didn't want to go… I knew deep down that I did.

> **Me:** Hey. Just letting you know Kashawn and Nelly want to see the cannabis farm in Colorado.

Maverick: And you? Do you not want to see? You don't want to come?

Me: Of course I do. Should we let Bolt and Skipper coordinate just so we can see them claw their way through the phones to hate fuck?

Maverick: Ha! Yeah, that works. You good? I think you said you were going home to visit?

Before I can respond, a shuffling sound in the living room distracts me. I leave the phone on the kitchen table to check. Mama stands at the window and holds back the curtain with one hand. Her brows are drawn together and lines bracket the tightness of her mouth.

"Mama, you okay?" I step farther into the room and walk over.

"I'm just worried." She turns distressed eyes toward me and bites her thumbnail. "Your daddy's still not home."

No, please God no. I don't want Mama to have to live this again. I don't want to have to.

"Mama, I—"

"He should be home by now," she insists, turning back to the window and pulling the curtain away to show sunshine and the tranquil front yard. "It's been hours since he left."

"No, it's been…" I am lost and helpless, but brace myself for the tornado I have to walk headlong into. "Mama, Daddy's gone. Remember?"

"Gone?" Confusion creeps into her gaze. "I know he's gone, Hen. He went to get my ice cream. Butter pecan. I told him he didn't have to, but you know how he gets." A smile briefly softens and curves the tight line of her lips. "Always wanting to give me stuff. *The desires of your heart, Bee,* he always says. That's what I live for. He try to act all hard, but he's a softie. A romantic."

Something cracks inside me. Not a new pain, but an old one that time was just starting to heal. The pain of losing my father and watching my mother grieve the love of a lifetime. Is there a crueler fate than being trapped in a reality where you lose the love of your life over and over again?

"Mama, Daddy's gone," I repeat, firming my voice. "Remember

he… he passed away."

She stares at me blankly for a few seconds before letting loose a humorless laugh.

"Girl, you better hush." She turns back to the window, shaking her head. "That's not funny. Don't even joke like that, Hen."

"I'm not joking, Mama. Daddy was in an accident," I say haltingly, swallowing the hot lump crowding my throat. "H-he didn't make it."

The curtain drops from her limp fingers, and she turns to face me, searching my expression for proof.

"No!" The shrill sound of her grief makes me jump and startles a heavy stampede of heartbeats in my chest. "He can't… don't say that. Don't you say that."

"Mama, I'm so sorry." I take a step toward her, arms extended, but she jerks away to face the window again.

"That can't be right." She snatches the curtain back, exposing the street with not even a pedestrian in sight. "I just… I just saw him. Just spoke to…"

She looks back at me, confusion pinching her features and she clutches the curtain in a balled fist.

"We just spoke," she shouts, a note of hysteria entering her voice. "He said he's bringing home the ice cream. The ice cream. He just went to get me some ice cream!"

I close my eyes against the fresh rush of pain. He did go get ice cream, but he never made it home. A drunk driver ran a light and the ice cream was a melted mess in the front seat by the time the paramedics pulled Daddy out. As far as I know, Mama's never eaten butter pecan ice cream again.

"He'll be back." She shakes her head, an adamant denial, a begging insistence. "He's coming home. He's coming home. He's coming home."

She tugs the curtains harder with every syllable that tumbles from her lips until the fabric falls, baring the windows, the naked panes ushering in the glare of sunlight and summer. Nothing like the cold winter night when Daddy died.

"Why would you say that?" Mama sobs, falling to her knees and banging her fist against the window pane. "Why would you lie? He's coming home. He has to… he has to come home."

Her shoulders shake beneath her housecoat. Tears run unchecked down her cheeks. I wasn't home when Mama found out

Daddy died, but I know it must have been this spectacle of shock and sorrow that her heart recalls in detail. That her soul is bleeding out on the carpet the same way it did that night. This is not a loss scabbed over. It is fresh and open and violent. Memory is often imperfect, a menagerie of omissions and reshaped recollections, but I know Mama remembers the night she lost my father with vivid, wrenching accuracy.

I watch helplessly as she stretches out on the carpet, heaving sobs shaking her body. Her voice goes hoarse from screaming disbelief.

"What is going on?" Aunt Geneva asks, rushing from the kitchen, two plastic bags still bundled in her arms. "Betty, I hear you all the way outside."

"I didn't know what to do," I say, and realize for the first time that my own cheeks are wet. And I'm not sure if the tears are for Mama finding out again that her husband has died, or if they're for me facing the reality of never seeing my father again by a twist of fate and the carelessness of a stranger.

Aunt Geneva sets the grocery bags down on the floor and approaches Mama with a sure step.

"Now, Betty," she says, crouching down beside her, balancing on the balls of her feet. "You'll make yourself sick. You need to stop all this hollering."

"But she said that…" Mama points at me like I'm a stranger. "She said that John was dead."

"It's okay. Everything's okay," Aunt Geneva soothes her. "Let's go to your room and lie down."

"You'll lay down with me?" Mama asks, her voice hushing even as her eyes remain wild and searching.

"I will. Just like old times," Aunt Geneva promises, pulling Mama to stand. "Remember what Grammy used to say when it was storming?"

"She said *it's coming up a cloud*." Mama chuckles, sniffing. "And when it was raining, but the sun was still shining, she'd say *the devil's beating his wife*."

Aunt Geneva loops her arm through Mama's, subtly directing their shuffling steps down the hall. "And remember they made us turn out all the lights when it was storming? And unplug everything?"

"And we had to just wait till the storm passed over. And it was

dark." Mama looks to Aunt Geneva for confirmation. "Wasn't it?"

"It *was* dark, so we played bid whist with candles," Aunt Geneva says.

Mama drops her head to Aunt Geneva's shoulder. "You cheated."

"Me?" Aunt Geneva squeaks. "Daddy cheated. You know he always cheated at cards."

"He did." Mama's chuckle drifts down the stairs. "Ma would say, *Now, Mo*."

"*You know better than that*," the two sisters finish in unison, laughing in harmony.

It's quiet for a few seconds, and my ears strain to catch more of their conversation. Finally my mother's voice comes softer, barely audible.

"Sissy, I'm gon' be all right?" Her words float on the air as uncertain as a feather tossed in a tornado. My heart, still trembling and fragile from watching my mother relive my father's death, from reliving it myself, shatters. Hot tears burn my eyes and I have to cover my mouth to catch a sob. It's not fair. None of it is fair, and my rage and my sorrow run together down my face.

"Betty, I'm right here with you, and you'll be all right," Aunt Geneva says, and I don't understand how her voice doesn't shake with tears.

A few minutes later, Aunt Geneva comes back downstairs to find me still standing by the window.

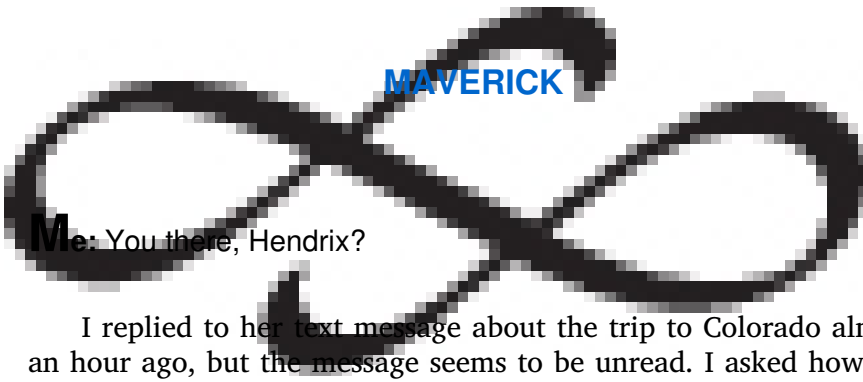
"I forgot," I whisper. "The doctor said don't argue, don't contradict. Redirect to calm her down, but I just… froze and forgot it all when she said Daddy was still alive."

"It happens," Aunt Geneva says, bending to retrieve the grocery bags from the floor. "We not gonna get everything right and we won't remember everything. You'll remember next time."

Next time?

I don't want there to be a next time. Not another time when Mama relives Daddy's death in a cruel trick her brain plays on her heart. There will be a next time, though, and with the advice from the doctors and from Aunt Geneva still ringing in my head, I promise myself next time I'll be better prepared.

CHAPTER 19



MAVERICK

Me: You there, Hendrix?

I replied to her text message about the trip to Colorado almost an hour ago, but the message seems to be unread. I asked how she was doing, how her visit home was going, and she never responded. I should leave it there. It's none of my business really.

But I'm coming to the end of doing what I *should* do when it comes to Hendrix Barry.

Fuck it.

Pausing on the beach during a quick afternoon walk, I pick up the phone and dial her number.

I'm about to hang up after the third ring, but she answers.

"Mav?" Her voice comes over husky, heavy.

"Yeah, it's me. You didn't answer my text message," I say, and it sounds lame in my own ears because why should she? She doesn't have to, but she always has before and I was concerned. "Just thought I'd check on you."

"You mean about the trip?" she rasps and sniffs.

"Are you… have you been crying, Hendrix?"

"Shit," she whispers, and it's a fragile sound, barely held together. "Let's talk later. I—"

"Hey, I'm sure you have friends you can talk to about things, but I… if it's about your mom, with you being home, I might understand. If I'm overstepping—"

"You're not," she says, her breath hitching before she steadies her voice and goes on. "Not overstepping, I mean. And it is about

my mom. It's just been harder than I even thought it would be. She had an episode and I… Hold on."

She mutes for a few seconds before returning, bringing with her the sound of a few cars passing by and a bird chirping in the background.

"I stepped out on the porch to talk," she says. "What's that sound in the background? Where are *you*?"

"On my beach." I survey the ocean, more serene that it was earlier this morning when I came out to surf. "I'd been at my desk all day. Just needed to move a little, but tell me what's going on with you there in North Carolina. You good?"

"Not at all." She lets out a tired sigh. "I just mishandled one of Mama's meltdowns really badly. Like I know better. I wasn't thinking."

"Don't put that on yourself. Tell me what happened."

"I know personalities can change with this condition, but she was mean to my aunt and cursed at her. You just have to know this is the woman who literally has the "Footprints" poem up in like three rooms and once washed my mouth out for calling someone a bitch. I was fourteen and as tall as she was."

"Who'd you call a bitch?" I tease, knowing it's not important, but hoping to relieve some of the tension choking the atmosphere.

"My cousin Ellie." Hendrix breathes out a laugh. "She *was* a bitch. She put gum in my hair and Mama had to cut it out. It was right before the school dance. Don't get me started."

"Oh, you already started," I say with a chuckle. "So what happened today?"

"I've never heard my mother curse, much less at her sister. She called my aunt fat. It was not her."

"My grandfather used to take it out on my mother a lot, too. She was the one with him the most. It was very intense and hard to manage."

"I'm sorry. That sounds awful."

"It's a lot to handle."

"And Aunt Geneva has been managing this on her own. I feel guilty, Mav. Conflicted. I can't live here permanently right now, and my mother refuses to move. I want to honor her wishes as long as I can, but seeing how much this condition has progressed, the house feels like a ticking time bomb."

"What does your aunt think?" I ask, digging my toes into the

sand. “How does she seem to be processing everything?”

“Better than I am. My mom forgot that my father is… gone. That he died.” Hendrix draws a sharp breath. “I watched her relive it and it was terrible. For her, it was happening for the first time.”

“That used to happen with Pop Pop.” I hesitate before going on. “Look, I’m not trying to give you advice or anything.”

“Oh, I’m not proud.” She laughs without humor. “I’ll accept advice.”

“We used to try to correct him, to tell him the truth, to try to keep him straight, but we realized something that changed our perspective.”

“And what was that?”

“This was one time when the truth wasn’t the right thing to do —not for him. If letting him believe a lie brought him any peace at all, it was worth it. A kernel of peace was better than the whole truth.”

She’s quiet for a beat. “You’re right. I read about it. They call it therapeutic fibbing. In the moment, I just forgot and blurted that he was gone. But what good does it do for her to know? She could forget again tomorrow.”

“And even though it’s not the first time she’s heard it, it will *feel* like the first time every time you try to convince her the worst day of her life actually happened. Maybe she keeps going back to a time when he was still with her because more than anything that’s where she wants to be.”

“Yeah,” Hendrix whispers, sniffs, and draws a sharp breath. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“Is she okay?” I drop down to sit on the sand, elbows propped on my knees and the phone pressed to my ear.

“Now she is. I talked to Aunt G a little after she got Mama settled. She said sometimes there’s nothing you can do and you just have to ride it out, but sometimes you can distract them either with an activity or a different memory.”

“That’s tough. This is a lot, Hen.”

“I know.” She exhales slowly. “I’m definitely getting into one of the support groups you sent.”

“That’ll be good, and just relax. Carve out some time for yourself. I know you’re busy.”

“Look who’s talking, Mr. Big Time.”

“I work hard and rest harder. I got shit I enjoy outside of work.”

“Like surfing?”

I grin, tasting the salty air and relishing the subtle ocean breeze that makes this property in my portfolio the one where I spend the most time.

“Yeah, like surfing. Been stalking my socials, have you?” I ask, inordinately pleased if she has.

“Black boy surfing,” she teasingly scoffs.

“I could teach you. Lemme get you on a board in my backyard Pacific here in Cali.”

There’s a silence in the wake of my invitation. I didn’t mean it like that, but now that I’ve said it, I can’t shake the image of her under me on a slick board early in the morning, droplets of water beading on her gorgeous radiant brown skin. She would be luminous and lush at sunrise. Should I check my rapidly growing fascination with Hendrix? Hell, yeah. Her proximity to Zere is a problem. Not so much for me, but for Hendrix and her business interests. I won’t, though. I know I’ll keep finding ways to see her. My whole life is a calculus of risk and reward. It’s undeniable that pursuing Hendrix involves risk, but the reward of possibly having something with her outweighs the pitfalls we’d inevitably have to negotiate.

Pursue her? Is that what I’m doing? It’s tickled the back of my mind maybe since the moment I saw her leading half my party in the electric slide. It slowly bloomed in my thoughts as I’ve watched her devotion to her mother under shitty conditions and her commitment to the Aspire Fund. Hendrix is an exceptional woman.

“I, uh, better go,” she says, breaking into my thoughts.

“Yeah, all right,” I say, but still search for another conversational lure to cast and keep her a little longer. “I’m glad you’re coming to Colorado.”

“I don’t think I have much choice. Nelly and Kashawn are determined. They think it’s a good idea.”

“And you don’t?”

“I think…” She pauses, and all the reasons it may not be a good idea for us to spend more time together seem to accumulate in inches, in the silence. “Maybe *they* could come and I could skip because—”

“No, that’s not how this works.” I harden my voice. “If you don’t come, no one comes.”

“Maverick, that makes no sense.”

“Those are the conditions.” She can read that however she wants. “So next week. Is that too soon?”

“I’m sure they’ll clear their schedules to accommodate,” she says with half-hearted bitterness that tells me she might just want to see me as badly as I want to see her.

“My people will coordinate with your people then,” I tell her.

“My people and your people can’t seem to be in the same room for two minutes without devouring each other,” she says with a laugh. “You can let Bolt know Skipper won’t be coming on this trip. And I mean that in every way you could interpret it.”

“I’ll make sure he’s prepared…” I pause, weighing the words before I say them because I know they will show a bit more of my hand. “I don’t care if Skipper comes or not, as long as you do.”

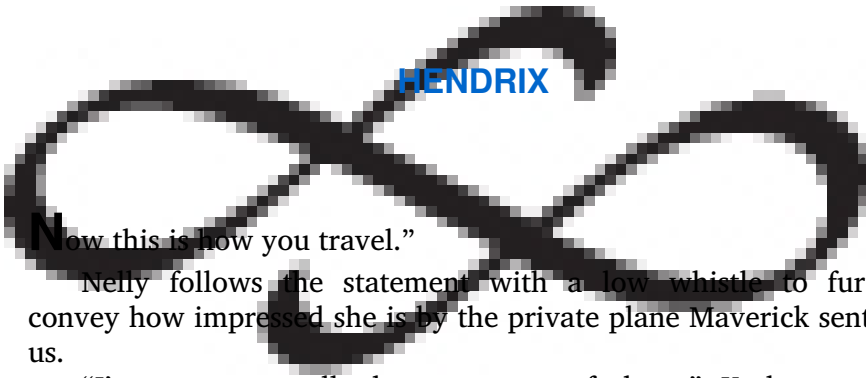
I’m not sure what has emboldened me. Was it hearing her tears again over her mother? Is that what bonded us even further and cemented my determination to see where this could go, damn the consequences?

She releases a heavy sigh. “I’ve already told you I’ll be there. Whether it’s a good idea or not remains to be seen.”

“Trust me. It’ll be fine.”

I don’t actually know that whatever happens between us will be “fine,” but I know damn well it will be worth it.

CHAPTER 20



HENDRIX

"Now this is how you travel."

Nelly follows the statement with a low whistle to further convey how impressed she is by the private plane Maverick sent for us.

"I've never actually been on one of these," Kashawn says. "Flying first class, of course, but this?"

She does a slow spin, taking in the cabin's handcrafted leather seats, the gold-trimmed walls, the plush carpet beneath our feet. The lounge is outfitted with a mammoth flat-screen television and a gourmet kitchen any chef would be proud of. I presume the closed door leads to a bedroom, but there's no way I'm finding out. I flop into one of the rear seats, leaving the front section to my partners.

"This flight is three hours," I say, pulling out my iPad. "And I need every one of them to prepare for this presentation. I've wanted to get a huge cosmetic deal for Chapel, and now that one is potentially on the table, I need to be ready when we get in front of them."

"Look at you." Nelly rests her hands on her hips, big sister pride in her eyes. "Bossing up and shit."

"They saw her at the game," I say semi-smugly. "Floor seats and face beat. She played the part, blowing kisses and flirting with the camera. Phone started ringing the next day."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Kashawn says, "but isn't that the night Maverick Bell invited you to his box and offered this trip to us?"

My smile petrifies and I drop my eyes to the iPad in front of me.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Girl, you know so.” Nelly snaps her fingers to get my attention.

“Don’t snap at me.” I look up at her, putting on a stern face, but fighting back a smile.

“Then don’t ignore me,” Nelly parries. “We’re grateful for this trip, but is there something else going on here? Like between you and—”

“Ladies,” Maverick says from the door that I assumed led to the bedroom. “So glad to have you on board. Hope you don’t mind if I bum a ride.”

My mouth drops open for a second, but I snap it closed, hopefully before he notices how thrown I am that he’s on the plane. What did he hear?

“Is it appropriate to say ‘welcome aboard’ when it’s your plane?” Kashawn jokes, bouncing a glance between Maverick and me.

“I was in Miami and hitched a ride.” Maverick walks up the aisle until he comes to my seat. “Hendrix, hi.”

“Hi.” I offer him a tight-lipped smile. “Thanks for this opportunity and for the… um, plane.”

“No problem.” He leans forward and whispers conspiratorially. “It’s not mine. I just use it when I travel.”

“Is that supposed to be your version of frugal?” I laugh. “‘I don’t own the forty-million-dollar plane. I just charter it a few times a month.’”

“We all make sacrifices,” he returns, grinning and apparently unbothered by my jab.

“Speaking of sacrifices,” Kashawn says. “I need to make some right now and work through these briefs before we land in Colorado.”

“Of course.” Maverick gestures expansively around the luxuriously appointed cabin. “Let me or one of the attendants know if you need or want anything.”

“All I want,” Nelly says, pulling out a purple-and-gold sleep mask emblazoned with *FUCK OFF*, “is a little nap before we land or I won’t be any good. Baby was up all night, and I knew Beth would have her solo today so I held it down.”

“Awww,” I commiserate. “That’s a good mommy. Rest while you can.”

“You be getting that no-kids sleep,” Nelly sighs.

“Honey, I wouldn’t trade it for the world,” I joke.

Rolling her eyes, Nelly slips the sleep mask down and slumps into her buttery soft leather seat. “Wake me when we get to the weed.”

“No kids for you?” Maverick asks, his voice lower, softer, and impossibly sexier with the effort of not disturbing Nelly’s sleep and Kashawn’s concentration.

“Nah.” I rest my hands flat on the table in front of me. “I know most people don’t get it, but I’m just not cut out for motherhood.”

He nods his head toward the empty seat beside me. “May I?”

The quiet enclosing us pulls tight, packed with heat as our eyes lock. I force myself to glance away before I get lost in that searching look. I could tell him that I’m working. I could ask him to sit somewhere else so I can focus.

But I won’t.

“You can sit anywhere you want, right?” I ask, tapping on my iPad. “It’s your plane.”

“Technically, it’s not.” He settles into the seat beside me. “So you don’t ever want kids?”

I roll my eyes and force my shoulders back, relaxing into the soft cushion. “Kids aren’t for everyone.”

“I have one and I agree with you,” he says with a laugh. “I’m in the ‘one is enough’ club.”

He sobers, the smile dying on his lips as he slants a glance at me.

“Zere and I could never see eye to eye on that.”

I turn my head to study him, expecting his expression to be a wall, but it’s more of an open door.

“Do you ever regret it?” I ask. “Like do you think it would have been worth it to compromise?”

“I haven’t regretted it one day. My father tells me he would have done anything to be with my mother, so maybe that’s how I know Zere and I weren’t supposed to be. I wouldn’t have been able to walk away. I didn’t feel that way. I have a beautiful daughter I’m proud of and would die for, and that’s it. I didn’t want any more.”

“I respect that. My two closest friends are the best moms, and I get why that’s right for them.” I let my gaze drift to the tarmac just beyond the window. “I knew pretty early on that I didn’t want that. When I was really young, I used to say I wanted kids because that’s what the world tells you. That’s what everyone expects, and you

don't always know how to be different at that age. You just fall in line. You're still a child yourself when they shove a baby doll in your hands and say *pretend you're the mommy*. Even that young they telegraph that this is what you're *supposed* to do."

I run my finger along the cool edge of my iPad and smile dryly.

"But by the time I got to college, I knew I didn't want that. People always ask why I don't want kids, like it's not enough to just know you don't. I don't ask anyone to defend their decision to *have* children. So why should I have to defend my decision *not* to?"

"You shouldn't have to," he says.

"No, but the world is constantly demanding that *why*. There are women like me who are mothering in our own ways, but have never carried a child or been a parent. We're teachers and mentors and social workers and godmothers. We find ways to pour love into the world, to shape the world for good without bearing a child. It's not about our wombs. It's about our hearts and how we share them. That is bodily agency—me getting to decide what I do with my body in this life."

"That's…" Maverick's stare doesn't waver from mine. "Wow, that's beautiful, Hendrix. I hadn't thought of it like that, but now I will."

"Most people don't think of it that way. Certainly not most men." I shrug and scoff. "I had a boyfriend once, someone I got pretty serious with in my twenties. He said he understood where I was coming from, that I didn't want kids, but deep down he thought he could change me. When it came down to it, he thought I would cave and choose being with him over being who I believe I'm supposed to be. That's not love."

"Any idea where is he now?"

"He's a car salesman in New Jersey, last I heard. Beautiful wife and three kids. I hope he's very happy. I hope *she's* very happy, but that would have felt like a prison term *for me*."

"Zere felt that way," he says. "I mean, that she could change my mind. People ask me the secret to my success. I guess I could spout a bunch of bullshit, but I think the thing that stands out to me is that I've always been certain. Not about life, but about what I want from it. That has really focused me in a way that a lot of people early in life aren't. I see that in you, too. I respect it."

I'm not sure what to say to that, but don't have to respond right away because the flight attendant walks through to prepare us for

takeoff. She offers champagne and food, which we both pass on. Once she returns to the front of the plane, a tight silence gathers between Maverick and me. I try to ignore the heat coming off his body and the clean scent that tortures me if I breathe too deeply. I deliberately keep my eyes trained on the hand-tufted floor covering, ignoring the querying looks he keeps sending my way. He clears his throat and shifts in his seat.

"So how're your mom and aunt?" he asks. "Things better when you left?"

"Yeah." Ironically, the most difficult aspect of my life—my mother's condition—offers a lifeline into safer conversational waters. "After that episode last week, she was better. She'll go hours, even a few days, where things seem almost normal, and then she'll just get out of step. Her mind is like this chain on a bike that slips when you least expect it, and you just land in a ditch. Forget riding until that chain is back on."

"That's a perfect way to describe it. Pop Pop would be talking over breakfast about seeing Wilt Chamberlain play in Philly, recalling the game in perfect detail, and a minute later didn't even recognize me. *Introduced* himself to me at the table and asked if I liked pancakes."

Sadness tightens the planes of Maverick's face for a moment before smoothing out.

"By lunch, he was back to talking shit about Bill Russell and the Celtics. That chain you're talking about popping back on."

"I guess I'm getting more and more afraid of the time when that chain doesn't pop back on," I confess.

"I'm so sorry, Hendrix," Maverick says, the words rough with emotion. "I hate you're having to go through this, that your mother is going through this. It's… it's hell."

The gentle rumble of his voice, the empathy in his eyes, make my vision swim with tears. I blink to keep them from falling, but one escapes, slicking my cheek. Before I can wipe it away, Maverick brushes his thumb under my eye. My breath catches and our gazes tangle. No, it's more than our eyes connecting. It's something deep inside me *recognizing*, drawn toward whatever he hides beneath his confident exterior. We're both bold, presenting a tough exterior to the world, but it's what's soft and secret that keeps bringing us together.

His touch lingers and so does his gaze, slowly skimming my

features. There's growing heat in his eyes and an answering warmth in me that starts low in my belly and creeps up to my heart. I cannot do heart shit with him. I shift my chin so his hand falls from my face.

"My concentration's shot," I say, forcing a smile. "I'm not sure I can get work done."

"I had some stuff to do, too, but maybe I was being optimistic." He runs his hands over his face and exhales. "I've been working nonstop on a deal, and my brain is more fried than I'd thought. This quick trip is not just for you ladies. I needed a break from all the shit I've had to focus on."

I glance at him, seeing past the confident set of his shoulders and the tight fade of his hair and the perfectly groomed hands, the expensive casual clothing—looking past all of that, I see fatigue dragging at the handsome face.

"Does this giant ecological footprint plane have Wi-Fi?" I ask, gently bumping my shoulder into his.

"Yeah, of course. You want to work after all?"

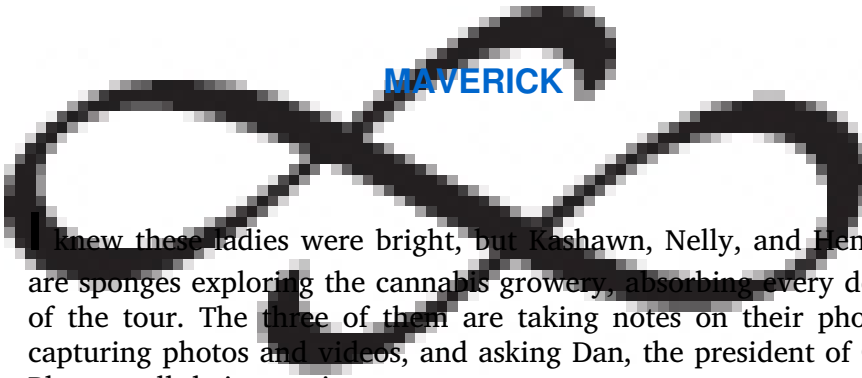
"Nope." I set up my iPad so the screen faces us. "Someone told me I should start *Top Boy* and I still haven't made time for it. I got three hours to kill, right?"

His smile comes wide and quick, and I love how it lightens the weariness on his face right away.

"I mean," I say, "I know you've seen it before, but—"

"Oh, no." He taps the screen a few times, navigating to the streaming site for the show, then angles a look at me that has my toes curling in my sandals. "I'll watch again… with you."

CHAPTER 21



MAVERICK

I knew these ladies were bright, but Kashawn, Nelly, and Hendrix are sponges exploring the cannabis growery, absorbing every detail of the tour. The three of them are taking notes on their phones, capturing photos and videos, and asking Dan, the president of CBD Pharms, all their questions.

"And this is climate-controlled?" Kashawn asks, squinting at the vents overhead.

"Yup," Dan answers, his shiny black hair slicked into a braid that falls to the middle of his back. "If your founder is growing at a higher altitude, he—"

"She," Hendrix corrects with a smile, walking alongside Dan up a row of plants in the greenhouse. "All our founders are she."

"Sorry," Dan chuckles. "*She'll* want to create a microclimate by using a hoop house or a greenhouse."

They pelt Dan with more questions, and he fields them all. He was one of the first growers I invested in. An Indigenous farmer looking to pivot away from traditional crops and methods to a new market, he proved to be a great litmus test for this kind of investment.

While the ladies study the greenhouse and the myriad parts that make this operation work, I study Hendrix. I can't stop. I keep surreptitiously seeking her out. The moment we shared on the plane, her crying—it was intense and I haven't been able to move on from the way I felt tied to her, not just by our shared experience, but by something deeper.

"If you'd like," Dan says, "feel free to send over the specs for

the founder you're considering and I'll look them over for you. Give you my assessment of whether she's ready, where she might need to make adjustments, what are the biggest risk factors, et cetera…"

"Seriously?" Kashawn gapes. "You'd do that?"

"Sure." Dan shrugs and shifts his gaze to me. "Any friend of Mr. Bell is a friend of mine. None of what you see here would be possible without him believing in me and investing years ago."

"Don't make me sound so altruistic," I say wryly. "I'm a businessman first and saw a fantastic opportunity. None of what we see here would be possible without *you*."

"A partnership then," Dan concedes with a smile. "Either way, we've found success working together and I'll never take it for granted, so yes. I'll help you ladies any way I can."

"We accept," Nelly pipes up, her expression lit with mischief. "Now you think we can have a lil' sample of your product before we go? Lil' toke?"

Dan's quick shout of laughter bounces off the greenhouse panes. "Of course. Lemme hook you up. Follow me."

We trail him from the greenhouse and toward the main office. Nelly and Kashawn walk ahead, chatting with Dan, but Hendrix falls behind and into step with me.

"This was so great," she says. "It will help us make an informed decision. Thank you."

Her smile blazes bright and her smooth cheeks glow with fresh air and her own natural radiance.

"You look happy right now," I tell her, taking a chance and slipping my arm through the crook of hers, linking our elbows. "I'd love to see you happy all the time."

It comes out before I check it, and by the way she watches me from the corner of her eye, I know it sounded too intense from one casual friend to another. I don't care, though. I'm not ready to articulate what it means that I enjoy being around Hendrix so much, that I think about her far too often. That in the shower some mornings, I get hard as a silver dollar remembering her scent and softness, and have more than once jerked off to the husky soundtrack of her voice on repeat in my thoughts. I don't want to articulate the implications of all that even to myself because I already know she won't give me a shot. If I asked her out, she would turn me down, no ifs or buts. I know she's aware of me in the same way. I'm not oblivious, but I pose a threat to her goals. And

Hendrix doesn't strike me as the kind of woman to choose a man over her dream. Not when it would cost her something she really wants, and knowing how hurt Zere is over our breakup, being with me would most certainly cost Hendrix that opportunity.

I'd love the chance to explore the promise of what I sense between us, but I doubt I'll get to, not with the specter of Zere and me on the periphery of my every interaction with Hendrix. Even when we were watching *Top Boy* on the plane, there was a tension in the way she held herself. How carefully she made sure our arms didn't touch on the table or that her leg never brushed against mine. She's holding herself back from me in every way possible.

I hate it.

I've never been more fascinated by any woman than I am by Hendrix. The juxtaposition of power and vulnerability, of brazenness and restraint—it's got me wide-open. I'm good at keeping my emotions in check, but I don't want to. I'm *not* good at denying myself something I want.

And I'm finally admitting to myself that I want Hendrix.

Bad.

Getting her would take strategy and careful planning, like everything else I've ever pursued and won. I'd have to make what she would gain more appealing than what she would lose. She doesn't know it, but we're in the discovery phase now. I'm finding out everything I can about her. What she likes, what she needs, what she hates.

Whenever I go after anything, I always say it's only a matter of time. That my success is inevitable, but I don't feel that way with Hendrix. If anything, I recognize that the odds are stacked against me. She's a woman with a very clear vision of what her future will look like.

No kids. *Fine with me. Already got one.*

Working to build her fund. *Great, I can help her expand it beyond anything she and her partners ever imagined.*

Then there's her career. Zere holds the keys to the next phase, and I know Hendrix won't risk that to be with me.

Or would she?

"You're mighty quiet," she says as we approach Dan's office. The others have already gone inside. "What are you thinking about?"

All the ways to win you over.

Aloud I say, “That first few episodes of *Top Boy* we watched on the plane. I’d forgotten how much I loved the early seasons.”

“Oh, my God!” She turns toward me and a smile lights her face. “I can already tell it’ll be my new addiction.”

I take it as a good sign that she hasn’t wrenched her arm away, so I push my luck by subtly tugging her a little closer until the full curve of her hip bumps up against me. I enjoy her softness, how she swells in extravagant ways. If she notices the contact, she doesn’t give any indication.

“Maybe we can catch a few more episodes on the flight back?” she ventures.

“I’m actually not flying back with you guys,” I tell her, inwardly cursing the plans I’ve already made. “The plane will take you to Atlanta because I know Nelly wanted to get back to her wife and kid. But I agreed to stay and help Dan with some community outreach stuff tomorrow.”

I’m watching her closely, so I catch the disappointment on her face before she masks it.

She does pull her arm away now. “That’s good.”

“Yeah, sometimes when you grow in these small towns, there’s a wariness from the community about bringing ‘them drugs into our town.’ Is it safe? Are you gonna make our kids junkies? That sort of thing.”

“And you sweep in, with your Black billionaire self, to ease all their fears and soothe their stereotypes?”

“I don’t know that they know about the billionaire thing. For one, most billionaires aren’t household names or faces.”

“Well, thanks to Zere, you kinda are.”

I pause my steps and wait for her to stop, too. She looks at me over her shoulder, her expression inscrutable.

“Believe it or not,” I say, “I never wanted to be known that way, but I was dating someone very famous. It came with the territory.”

I’m making progress in inches. The last thing I want to talk about is my ex-girlfriend and how awkward our situation would be if Hendrix succumbs to the obvious attraction between us. I’m not going to back away from the conversation, though. I’ll have to be open about everything if I stand a chance.

“I get it.” Hendrix shrugs and resumes walking, not waiting for me to join her. “None of my business.”

I don’t refute that, but lengthen my steps to draw even with her again.

“I’m calling you this week,” I say without preamble, and she stumbles for a second before steadying her gait.

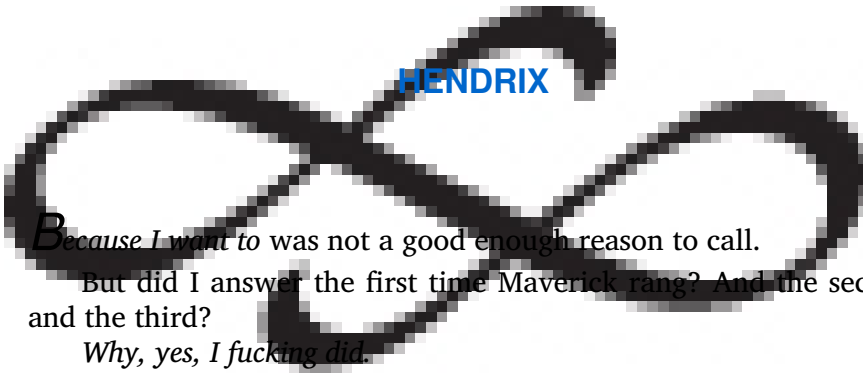
She tilts her head just the slightest bit, not enough that I can look straight into her eyes, but at an angle where I have an unobscured view of the regal arch of her cheekbone and the plushness of her lips and the heavy fringe of lashes that hide anything she might be feeling from me.

“Why?” she asks.

I flash her the buccaneer’s grin I reserve for when something I desire very badly is within my grasp.

“Because I want to.”

CHAPTER 22



HENDRIX

Because I want to was not a good enough reason to call.

But did I answer the first time Maverick rang? And the second and the third?

Why, yes, I fucking did.

I'm not proud of it. On the first call, he asked about my mother and the support group. I told him I'd joined one online and it was really helping me process how the changes Mama is experiencing impact not just her, but our whole family. Our whole lives.

Innocent enough.

The second time he asked me a few questions about Hue and to see if we had talked to the cannabis founder. He made sure we had everything we needed to move forward with her should we decide to.

Still feeling pretty guilt-free.

That third time, though, he asked if I'd been watching *Top Boy*.

Of course I had. It's freaking fantastic. It satisfies *The Wire* itch I didn't even know I needed scratched. And everyone knows the Brits make everything amazing. This conversation devolved into us watching season two together. *What are you watching* may as well have been *what are you wearing*. Simul-watching Netflix is like phone sex, like masturbatory streaming.

I can't keep doing this.

And yet, when the text message comes through and I see it's him, that traitorous heart of mine starts batting its wings like a hummingbird on steroids.

Maverick: You down to watch an episode tonight?

"Who got you smiling like that?" Soledad asks, jerking me back to game night at her house.

She splits her attention between the phone in my hand and the kitchen counter, which holds a platter decorated with a variety of cheeses, brightly colored fruit, and sticky dollops of jams and sauces.

"Who smiling?" I play dumb. I've never seen my own face when Maverick texted or called, but it can't be good.

"You been holding out on us?" Soledad skewers a grape tomato, salami, green olives, and a mozzarella ball, adding it to the growing stack of food on her platter. "Some man finally got your attention?"

"Or some woman?" Yasmen asks, entering from the living room and carrying a bottle of wine. "Don't forget that bi-awakening she had a few months ago."

"It was one night." I roll my eyes. "A very pleasant night actually, where she sucked my soul from between my legs and snatched my edges, but that doesn't constitute a bi-awakening. I was never asleep. I honestly think most people are gender fluid. Society just locks us into these heteronormative roles before we have a chance to consider everything on the menu."

"Well, I'm Judah-sexual," Soledad preens. "I wouldn't care what package he came in. I'd want him no matter what."

"Easy to say when he's pounding you through the mattress every night," I cackle. "With that big dick."

"Oh, my gosh. It's not *every* night. We don't live together yet." Soledad sends a scandalized glance toward the door that leads from the kitchen into the next room. "And keep your voice down. He'll hear you."

"I think he knows he fucks you good," Yasmen joins in.

"*Et tu*, Yas?" Soledad tries to look outraged and prissy, but the lusty twitch to her lips spoils the effect.

"Has he ever let you put your finger up his ass?" I ask, recalling what Imani said about prostate orgasms.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Josiah says, turning on his heel to leave as soon as he enters the kitchen. "I want no part of this conversation."

"Boy, get in here." Yasmen walks over and drags her husband back. "Ain't nobody coming near your butt. Men. Always scared

somebody want to get in that ass."

"I bet Judah would be open to it," Soledad chirps.

"Really, Sol?" Judah asks from the door, true exasperation all over his face.

Judah is *actually* reserved—not like the rest of us who just fake it sometimes. He doesn't want his business all in the streets. He's not naturally the most social guy, and it's taken him some time to get used to how freely my friends and I discuss every single thing that passes through our brains. Filter-free.

"Sorry, honey." Soledad abandons her tray of hors d'oeuvres to throw her arms around her boyfriend's neck. "You know how we get."

He kisses her. It's just a quick peck, but the look that lingers between them is hot and affectionate. Yasmen still has her arms around Josiah's waist. The clack of dominoes from the living room reaches us in the kitchen. All their children are here for game night. Yasmen's kids, Deja and Kassim. Soledad's daughters, Lupe, Inez, and Lottie. Judah's twin boys are usually with their mother on the weekends, but she and her husband are out of town, so he has Aaron and Adam tonight. It's a houseful, and everyone belongs to someone else.

Except me.

"Don't think I forgot the original question, Hen," Soledad says, turning and leaning her back against Judah's chest with his arms crossed over her waist. "I've caught you like three times grinning down at that phone. Is there someone we should know about?"

Soledad is a pit bull under her pastels and recipes.

"It's just a friend," I evade, slipping the phone into the side pocket of my sundress.

"A *he* friend?" Yasmen walks over to the counter and hovers a hand over a small jar.

"Yas, touch my fig jam and you drawing back a nub," Soledad warns, not missing a beat. "Just tell us who, Hen. I mean, I shared with you about Judah's—"

"Speculation," Judah cuts in, smiling in spite of the gravity he clearly tries to lend his tone. "That was purely speculation, and I'd prefer you keep it to yourself."

"It's Maverick Bell," I blurt. After keeping our text messages and calls and nightly simul-watches of *Top Boy* a secret, I'm almost relieved to tell my friends. I need them to tell me it's okay. That I

haven't crossed any lines. That I'm not in the wrong.

"Oh." Soledad steps from Judah's arms and walks back to the counter. She starts straightening things on trays and moving cheese around unnecessarily.

"Spit it out, Sol." I roll my eyes. "You obviously have something to say based on how suddenly busy you are with your charcuterie."

"It's just…" She falters and looks at Yasmen, silently recruiting her help. "Ya know."

"No, I don't." I squirm on my stool at the counter. "Tell me."

"Well, didn't he date your friend?" she asks. "Is that breaking some kind of girl code?"

"She and Zere are business associates," Yasmen pipes up, reaching for the jam and drawing back when Soledad lightly pops her hand. "Not like besties. And Zere and Maverick have been apart for what? For how long?"

"About two months," I reply weakly.

When I say it out loud, it seems like no time. And yet, I feel so close to Maverick; have felt connected almost from the beginning. The regularity of our communication has only heightened the sense of friendship. Hell, if I'm being honest, of intimacy. Not like fucking or phone sex or anything like that, but the way someone truly gets to know you, begins to anticipate your responses and untangles knots in you it usually takes others years to loosen.

"We're just friends," I say, and even I hear the defensive note in my voice. "Really we are."

Damn. It's getting worse.

"Babe, could you carry this through to the living room?" Soledad gives the tray to Judah and smiles in that disarming way that makes everyone do her bidding and like it.

"I'll grab a tray, too," Josiah says, taking the hint. He slaps Yasmen's ass when he walks by, and the casual intimacy of it creates a tiny ache in my heart. When was the last time someone slapped my ass like that? Not in a gropey, creepy way like sneaking a feel in a crowded club, but with a possessive familiarity? A sureness that his touch would be welcome because there's no place on me that doesn't feel like his and there's no place on him that doesn't feel like mine?

Seeing my friends makes me realize that I *do* want that someday with the right person. Maybe I have wanted it for a while and not acknowledged it because I know I'm not settling for no

trash man. And let's face it, most men are trash. I don't feel like getting on an app or meeting someone new, or figuring out if I'm being catfished. I'm too old to be bothered with that shit, so maybe I hid from myself that I want someone to touch me, to look at me like that. Someday.

"Okay if you're just friends, great," Yasmen says after their guys leave the kitchen. "If you're more—"

"We're not," I cut in to assure them and myself. "We're just friends."

"And you don't want more?" Soledad's expression softens. "You know we won't judge you if you want it to be more, Hen."

I do know that, and as I look at my closest friends, I'm reminded that I'm not actually alone in this world. In addition to Mama and Aunt Geneva, I have Soledad and Yasmen, and by extension, their beautiful families, their amazing children. I have them all and I can be as honest with them as I need to be with myself.

"Am I attracted to him?" I ask. "Hell, yeah, of course I am. You saw the man in a wetsuit."

Yasmen shivers dramatically. "It was a sight we won't soon forget."

"But it's not just how he looks," I say, fiddling with one of Soledad's toothpicks and dropping my eyes to the counter. "He's generous and thoughtful. When we're together… when we talk… something sparks. I look forward to our conversations. He makes me think and question and… Well, I like having him in my life."

I glance up, searching my friends' faces. "Is that wrong?"

"Nothing wrong with any of that," Soledad says. "I'm glad you have it. I just want every step you take to be with your eyes wide open. If something more than friendship develops with him, it gets complicated."

"If there's one thing you are more than anyone else I've ever met," Yasmen says, dipping a pecan into the fig jam and grinning at Soledad's indignant face, "it's honest. You're always honest with us. Make sure you're being honest with yourself."

A laughing roar erupts from the room next door.

"Draw four, Aaron!" screams Lottie, Soledad's youngest.

No answering response comes from Aaron, who is only partially verbal. I love how, now that he's comfortable with our group, he's a little more engaged.

“Jesus,” Yasmen groans. “Uno again? Please make it stop.”

“We also have Taboo,” Soledad says, rubbing her hands together. “And Cards Against Humanity.”

“Josiah does like that one,” Yasmen admits grudgingly. “I guess let the games begin.”

Another text message flashes on my phone.

Maverick: Hey. So we starting a new episode or what?

The scene of domesticity suddenly feels a little tight around my collar. Everyone paired off. All the kids having blended family fun. I’m usually fine being the glamorous third wheel who needs nothing and nobody beyond my girls. But tonight that ache spreads over the surface of my heart like an ink stain, and I want… more. Something else. The world isn’t designed for women like me. Women who’d rather be single literally for years than settle for a partner not worthy of her. A woman who doesn’t want to be a mother, and assumes the rich auntie role with panache, but occasionally feels left out on game night.

“Can I get a rain check?” I ask, grabbing a paper plate and loading it with several hors d’oeuvres and some of Soledad’s brownie batter dip. I love that shit. “I think I’m gonna head out.”

“And miss game night?” Soledad’s consternation is clear.

Yasmen’s eyes drift from my face to the phone still clutched in my hand. “Let’s give her a pass, Sol.”

“I promise next time,” I say, heading for the back door and balancing my heavy plate. “I’m in for Taboo and Picklenary—”

“Pictionary,” Soledad corrects me with a smile.

“That too. All of ’em. Next time. Love yous!”

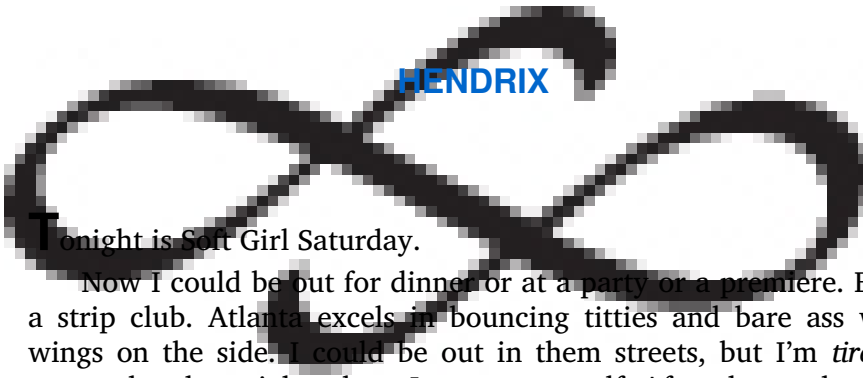
“Love yous,” they both chorus.

As soon as I’m in my car I set the plate on the passenger seat and take my phone back out.

Me: Hey! I’m down. Give me twenty?

Maverick: I’ll wait for you.

CHAPTER 23



HENDRIX

Tonight is Soft Girl Saturday.

Now I could be out for dinner or at a party or a premiere. Even a strip club. Atlanta excels in bouncing titties and bare ass with wings on the side. I could be out in them streets, but I'm *tired*. I want a low-key night where I pamper myself. After the week… the month—okay, the year I've had—I *deserve*.

The sound of my girl Tems crooning drifts through my apartment, her song as sultry as a Caribbean breeze. Cradling a glass of wine, I walk out onto the balcony overlooking Sky Square. It's Georgia in late July, so it's hot, but at nearly ten o'clock, it's cooled a little. Enough for me to lounge on my balcony, leaning on the rail and watching the people taking to Skyland's cobblestone streets on a Saturday night. I'm wearing my skimpy silk pajamas with the spaghetti strap top and the short bottoms. My hair is deep conditioning, the natural curls soaking up every bit of moisture they can before I braid them up and throw my hair in a new protective style next week. My brightening under-eye patches are on. I've done my glass-skin routine so my face looks like a glazed doughnut.

I'm chilling and in for the night.

The only thing I neglected in this completely indulgent evening of self-care is food.

I pull up a delivery app on my phone.

A notification from Black Business interrupts my order, and I see Zere's name before it scrolls away. Curiosity piqued, I pull up the social media site.

It's a photo of Zere and some guy I don't recognize, but feel

somehow that I should. He's about her height. A white man with light brown hair, athletic build. The headline below the photo blares speculation.

Hard Launch? Is Zere Moving on with a New Mogul?

The former supermodel stepped out last night with LA-based real estate mogul Charles Filmore. Spotted leaving Hollywood's Sugarfish, the two looked very cozy and neighboring diners reported they held hands on the table. This sighting comes a mere two months after the model-turned-television-personality released a statement about the end of her three-year relationship with tech mogul Maverick Bell.

Another mogul, huh? Girl, you got a type. We see you. Get that bag, boo.

Zere and I haven't spoken much lately. We've both been doing other things, but there are a few network executives reading our pitch and we have meetings in New York next week.

"And it's my birthday," Zere had said on our last call. "You can stay for my party. Please come."

I had said yes, and I hope I don't come to regret it. It occurred to me to ask if Maverick would be attending her party, but that might raise suspicions. Why would I need to know if her ex-boyfriend will be there?

I glance back down at the Black Business post. Considering Zere's glowing smile and the hand tucked into the real estate mogul's as he helps her into his Maserati, maybe she wouldn't care that Maverick and I are friends.

Maybe she wouldn't care if we were more…

My stomach growls, reminding me there are more pressing things than the drama between Zere and Maverick.

"Like food," I mutter. "How have you gone so long without eating, girl?"

Probably because I worked all day and didn't shut it down until this evening. My finger hovers over the icon of my favorite wing spot, when the phone rings.

Maverick's name on the screen gives me pause.

I'm tempted not to answer, even as every fiber of my body begs me to grab that call before he hangs up. There is a civil war between the clear-thinking career woman who knows she needs to avoid romantic involvement with Maverick, and the touch-starved girl who talks to him every night under the flimsy guise of casual friendship.

“Hey!” I say, my voice artificially bright. “What’s up?”

“Wagwan,” Maverick answers.

I can’t help but laugh at his use of the customary greeting we hear so much on *Top Boy*, which basically means “what’s up?”

“Wagwan,” I return.

“You not running the streets on a Saturday night?”

“Nah. It’s a lazy night in. Pampering myself.”

“I hope you weren’t planning to watch an episode without me.”

“I might be,” I tease. “What do you need?”

“I’m in your city.”

I straighten on my couch and lean forward, elbows on my knees because I don’t think I heard him right.

“And you just told me you’re home.”

“Yeahhhhh,” I say, drawing out the one syllable into a dozen possibilities. “And?”

“And I want to see you.”

I touch my hair, twisted into big knots and colored creamy white with three different products.

“I’m not up for going out,” I tell him. “I was just about to order some food.”

“Order enough for two. I could come over.”

“I’m not *inviting* you over,” I reply with a firmness the butterflies flapping around in my belly don’t approve of.

“Have pity on a friend.”

“Hmmm,” I grunt noncommittally.

“I came to town for this charity event. A fundraiser for a school I serve on the board of, the Young Leaders Academy of Atlanta. You heard of it?”

“Ezra Stern’s school? Of course. They do great work.”

“Well, I’m on the board so… thank you?”

We laugh together, and my shoulders relax a little. I don’t want to allow myself the pleasure of his company and his conversation, but every time he’s on the other end of any device—phone, iPad, whatever—my defenses drop and before I know it we’re two episodes into season two on Netflix. After the rapport we’ve built recently, I don’t want to test my strength of will in the flesh.

“I didn’t eat the food there, though,” he continues. “Can I come scoop you?”

“I’m wearing pajamas.”

“Throw on something.”

“I don’t have on any makeup.”

“Good. I love your natural skin.”

I scoff, but a small smile tugs at my lips. Charmer. “You’ve never seen me without makeup.”

“Then it’s about damn time I do.”

“I just washed my hair.”

“Got a hat?”

“When a Black woman tells you she just washed her hair, you should know that is a full-ass production and she ain’t going nowhere.”

“I’m aware,” he says, laughing. “But surely there’s some way you could venture out with me in public. We could go to a dive. We could eat at a drive-in and you wouldn’t have to get out of the car. I don’t care.”

He pauses and draws in a sharp breath.

“I just want to see you, Hen.”

I close my eyes and heart against the tidal wave of response at those words. I don’t want this anticipation, how it shortens my breath. I don’t want to acknowledge the way my nipples pebble under my satin top from the sensation of that deep voice licking over me. This is so dangerous. And surely not wise.

But I’m doing it anyway.

“It’s not going to be fancy,” I sigh. “So lower your billionaire bar, but it will be an Atlanta institution.”

“I didn’t grow up a billionaire, Hendrix,” he says dryly.

“Oh, no. You grew up the son of a professional basketball player. Nearly impoverished. You may have grown up with just a silver spoon in your mouth, but now it’s platinum.”

He sucks his teeth, but chuckles. “Girl, just send me your address.”

“I need a few minutes to get my hair at least presentable for going outside.”

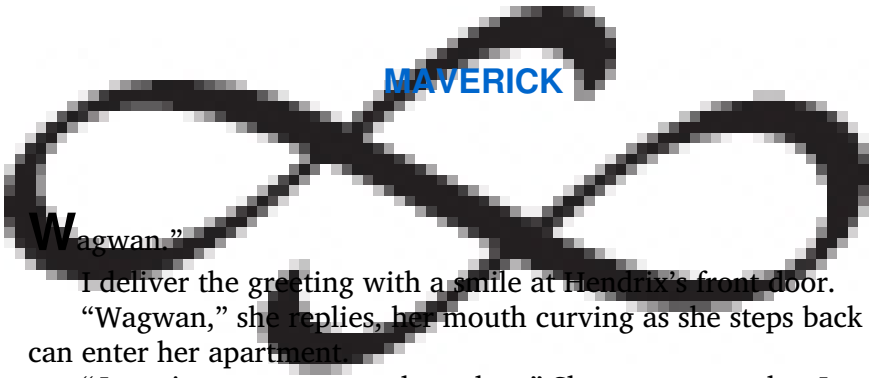
“You know I’ll take you however.”

The words *I’ll take you* hang in the air, a lasso whipping overhead, ready to fall over my shoulders, slip around my waist and draw me in.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll be ready.”

What a lie. I’ll never be ready for this man.

CHAPTER 24



MAVERICK

"Wagwan."

I deliver the greeting with a smile at Hendrix's front door.

"Wagwan," she replies, her mouth curving as she steps back so I can enter her apartment.

"Just gimme a sec to grab my bag." She turns away, but I gently clasp her wrist to stop her. She looks at me over her shoulder, a question in her eyes.

"Hold on," I say, pulling her into a hug. "I'm glad to see you."

I keep it loose, fighting the urge to crush her softness against me. She smells so damn good, I briefly tighten my arm around her waist and dip my head to catch the scent at her neck. It's something fresh and clean, with top notes of *fuck me against a wall*. I'm instantly hard, and keep my arm at her waist, not willing to let her go yet, but insert a few inches between us so she doesn't feel the effect she has on me from jump.

It's my first time seeing her since the trip to Colorado. Despite her objections on the phone, she looks beautiful. I drink her in, noting that her hair is still damp from the fresh wash and tamed into two braids, the tips of which brush her shoulders. Her skin is flawless and a deep, luminous shade of chestnut brown. She must only be wearing lip balm or something simple because the natural chocolate-rose color of her lips is in evidence. I think of *A Different World* reruns when she smiles. She has a Kim Reese grin; wide and blindingly white and infectious. How could anyone not smile back at this woman?

She licks her lips and pulls out of our hug.

“Um, it’s good to see you again, too.” She hooks a thumb over her shoulder toward the floating stairs that lead up to a loft. “Like I said, need to grab my bag.”

“I’ll be right here,” I tell her, taking a seat and spreading my arms across the back of the couch.

Her apartment is exactly what I would expect, but also different from what I envisioned. A cream-colored couch dominates the front room, its overstuffed cushions punctuated with pops of fluffy pillows in shades of cool green, muted violet, and pink. Dark hardwood floors are splashed with area rugs along the same color palette. A brass-toned bar sits against one wall, fully stocked with bottles of liquor and glasses.

The loft above is walled and I can’t make out much detail, but I’m certain that’s where she sleeps. I’d love to be invited up there someday. To be invited into her bed. Into her life. It will never happen if she doesn’t know I want it to. That’s what tonight is for. I know giving me a shot involves risk for her, but I want to convince her it could be worth it. Risk is coded into my DNA. I’m completely comfortable with it like a boa constrictor you keep as a house pet. I fool myself into thinking I’m safe long enough to do what needs to be done.

And this needs to be done.

When she comes back, she’s topped her two braids with a dark blue Braves baseball cap. Her denim romper shorts fit loosely everywhere but the ass. The material clings to the alluring curvature of rounded hips and butt, hitting midway down her smooth, thick, firm thighs. Oversized hoops brush her cheeks, and a gold ankle bracelet rests just above her Samba Adidas.

“Ready?” She tightens the strap on a Prada cross-body bag. Fiddles with gold bangles stacked at her wrists. Tugs at the end of one braid on her shoulder. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was fidgeting. I’d think she was nervous.

“Yeah, ready.” I nod toward the door. “Lead the way to this culinary institution.”

She exits the apartment, locking up before we start down the hallway. I let my hand rest at the small of her back. She’s warm and soft beneath my palm. I want to turn back around and say *fuck wherever we’re going.* I’d rather hole up in her apartment all night while we get acquainted with each other’s bodies. Trade memories, fears, dreams in a cocoon of privacy. She tenses beneath my hand

before she steps away from my touch.

We got a ways to go before we get there, but that's okay. Hendrix will be worth it.

Once in the car, she leans forward and whispers the address to the driver. They laugh quietly for a second before she sits back and raises the privacy partition.

"What's so funny?" I ask. "Where we going?"

"You'll see." She smiles, eyes lit with mischief. "It's not that big of a deal. This place is nothing fancy. Believe me. The opposite. I'm just guessing you've never been to one."

"To one? So it's a chain?"

She zips a finger across her lips. "Talk about something else."

So I do. While the city's lights blur past the windows, I focus all my attention on Hendrix. The deal she's been working on for her client Imani. An update on her mother's condition, which seems to be holding steady as of now. When she tells me Aspire decided to take on the cannabis founder, I'm proud that I had at least a little to do with that move. We even debrief about the last episode of *Top Boy* we watched. We're now into episodes I hadn't seen yet, and the storytelling is fantastic.

I'm distracted as the car comes to a stop. I peer through the car window at the restaurant's iconic bright yellow and black sign.

"Waffle House?" I ask, turning a smile on her.

"You said you didn't need it to be fancy." She shrugs and grins. "And I did promise I'd take you to an Atlanta institution. Have you ever eaten at one?"

"No, but I'm starving so let's do it."

She is the perfect blend of highbrow and hood-brow. At ease socializing and negotiating deals in rarefied air with the world's wealthiest, but then completely comfortable in a Waffle House dressed down on a Saturday night. She moves between wildly different spaces, never pretending to be anyone but herself. Her level of authenticity is rare and compelling. She's as at home in her own skin as anyone I've ever met.

She hops out of the SUV before I can help her down.

Of course she does.

"We'll be maybe an hour or so," I tell the driver Bolt arranged for me while I'm in the city.

"Yes, sir," the driver says. "I'll wait here."

Here is a parking lot with cracks in the asphalt. It looks like it

could use a facelift, contrasting with the black Bentley Bentayga and its tinted windows and costly rims.

"You're not coming in?" Hendrix asks the driver. "Matthew, was it?"

Surprise flickers over the driver's face momentarily before he schools it into the professional mask. "Um, yes. It's Matthew."

"You're not hungry?" Hendrix persists.

"I'll be fine," Matthew says. "Thanks for checking. Unless you need me, Mr. Bell."

"No, you can wait here," I tell him. "Thanks, though."

As soon as we enter, the smell of fried… everything slaps me across the face. It's past eleven o'clock, and the place is packed. There's one empty booth at the very back, which the hostess, a woman I put maybe in her early sixties, shows us to.

"Come on, babies," she coos at us, shuffling past the packed booths. But then she tramples the "somebody's grandma" image by hurling a stream of cuss words at the cook behind the grill.

"Motherfucker get on my damn nerves," Ms. Pearl, according to her nametag, mutters as we sit. "Slow ass. Y'all know what you want?"

"No, ma'am," Hendrix replies, lifting her menu. "Well, I do, but it's his first time. So I'll let him look."

"Can't go wrong with the hash browns," she tells me. "Try 'em all the way at least once before you die."

"What's 'all the way'?" I ask.

"You get 'em with hickory-smoked ham, melted cheese, and jalapeño peppers," Ms. Pearl says. "And some grilled mushrooms and diced tomatoes."

I frown. "Oh, that sounds—"

"Sausage gravy," she continues, "grilled onions, and then top it with chili."

"And have a paramedic on standby," Hendrix jokes. "I think we should ease him in. Give us a sec."

Pearl shuffles back to the kitchen, yelling at the cook and leaving a trail of obscenities in her wake.

"So what do you recommend?" I ask, scouring the menu for some item my chef wouldn't judge me for. No such luck.

"Well, you do have to have the hash browns," Hendrix says, her expression absolutely serious. "I think a good initiation for you is the All-Star. You can't go wrong with that."

“What’s the All-Star?”

“You get eggs and toast, a side of grits. You can choose between hash browns and a tomato, which… duh. You getting the hashbrowns. I suggest scattered. It comes with a waffle. Try pecan.”

“Is that what you’re having?”

“No, I’m getting a waffle sandwich. You take your eggs and bacon and smush them between two waffles. I’ve had just about everything on this menu at least once. Been coming here since college. We used to hit it after the club all the time. Absorb some of the alcohol,” she says with a wink.

A sound at the front of the store distracts me from the menu. Someone turns on music. A group of teenagers or maybe they’re in their early twenties. Two of the girls stand up in the booth and start dancing. Their friends stay seated, but sing along with a Tyler, The Creator song.

The dingy dining room is like something out of a movie. Every area of the restaurant seems to have its own tableau. The dancing music corner. A fight breaking out behind the counter between two employees. A spades tournament spread across three tables, plates of food interspersed with stacks of cards. It’s colorful and animated and electric.

“It’s like this all the time?” I ask.

“The later, the better. ’Bout two a.m. is the best.” She rests her elbows on the battered tabletop. “You know Atlanta has the highest concentration of Waffle Houses in the country. Can’t throw a stick without hitting a Waffle House around here. Their headquarters are in Norcross. This one is my fave. We’d drive past three to get to this one.”

“College Park?” I ask, remembering a sign on the way in.

“It’s Collipark,” she says, her grin mischievous. “If you’re really ATL.”

“You weren’t even born here,” I tease.

“Most people aren’t, but this feels as much like home as anywhere in the world.” Her smile melts away. “It’s hard to imagine living back in my small town in North Carolina, but I will while my aunt recovers. I’d move my mom here if she’d let me.”

Ms. Pearl returns to the table to take our orders, and I note Hendrix gets an extra All-Star meal. I guess she is hungry, but I know better than to comment on the food a woman orders. None of my business.

“Thank you for taking time from your self-care night to come out with me,” I say.

“What was I supposed to do? Let you end up in some bougie restaurant with perfectly prepared steaks and a Michelin star when all this”—she sweeps an arm to encompass the grease-splattered chaos of the Waffle House—“could be yours?”

“You saved me.”

She dips her head graciously. “You’re welcome. What would you do without me?”

I actually hadn’t planned to accept the invitation from Ezra Stern for tonight’s fundraiser, but then I saw the Black Business post yesterday, capturing Zere on what is, as far as I know, her first date since our breakup. Bolt sent me a link to the post. No comment, of course. A man of few words except when I want his ass to be quiet. Then he’s always got shit to say.

Seeing Zere dating freed something up inside me. It further settled that I’m ready to move on with the woman seated across from me. I don’t care that I’m probably the last man she should date if she wants to work with Zere. I don’t care that it might require us both to sacrifice and make compromises. If she’s willing, so am I. And I won’t know if she’s willing if I don’t try.

“What’re you thinking about so hard?” Hendrix asks, slanting a look at me from under long lashes.

“How pretty you look without makeup,” I say. Her face turns as close to bashful as a women this bold can be. “I mean, you look pretty with it, too, of course, but you have such a natural glow.”

“It’s melanin,” she laughs, lowering her head and running a finger along the raggedy edge of the aged booth table. “And my glass-skin care routine. That doesn’t hurt.”

“Well, it’s working. You look about nineteen.”

“Now you lying.” She rolls her eyes and grins.

“Since we’re talking about age…” I venture. “Did Zere invite you to her fortieth birthday party next week in New York?”

The sweet curve of her lips levels, the openness of moments before replaced by a guarded expression.

“She did,” Hendrix says, still not looking up at me.

“You going?”

The silence gathering between us is weighted by all the words and sentiments we haven’t spoken; things I’d like to say tonight, if she’ll listen. If she’ll let me.

“Um, I’m still deciding,” Hendrix answers, finally glancing up from the table and finding my eyes with hers. “You?”

I sense that my answer will impact hers. If I’m attending, I can bet my Bugatti that she won’t.

“I don’t think so.” I shrug. “Not that it would be awkward. She and I are on good terms.”

It’s technically true. Things are still a little tense between Zere and me, but damn. *She* invited *me* to her party.

“Just busy?” Hendrix asks.

“I think I’m on the West Coast that weekend,” I lie.

“Oh, gotcha.” I can’t interpret her look as relief or disappointment.

“You joined the four-oh club yet?” I ask.

“Yup. You?”

“Last year. Zere invited maybe two hundred of my ‘closest’ friends for a party at the house in Miami.” I flash a wry grin. “How ’bout you? You do anything special?”

There’s reminiscence in her extended sigh. “My fortieth birthday was amazing. I flew me and my besties Soledad and Yasmen to Dubai. It was spectacular. Spared no expense, drank like a fish.”

Defiance enters her eyes. “Hooked up with anything breathing.”

“Good for you,” I reply neutrally. Is she saying that to put me off? I don’t care who she fucked before. Once I have her, all other pussies and dicks will be laid to rest. “It was just the three of you?”

“That’s all I needed. I’m closer to them than anyone. My other friends in Atlanta threw me a huge party, but forty was big for me. I wanted to turn up, yes, but I also wanted to reflect. Yas and Sol are the full range of friendship.”

“You guys grew up together?”

“You’d think, but no. We’ve only known each other a few years. We met in a yoga class and just clicked. I knew very soon after we met that these were my people, and we’ve only gotten closer year after year.”

“You said they have kids.” I raise my voice a little to be heard over the group singing Keyshia Cole’s “Love” at the other end of the dining room.

“Yes, I’m always on rich auntie duty,” she laughs. “Yas has two kids with her ex-ex-husband.”

“Ex-ex?”

“They divorced and remarried.”

“People do that in real life?”

“They did. They belonged together. It was obvious to everyone that they needed to reconcile, so we were all relieved when they got their shit together. And Sol has three daughters.”

“She’s married?”

“Divorced.” She screws up her face with disgust. “Her husband was a trash ass… Hmm, hmm, hmmm. He wasn’t good to her. And not your standard-issue trash. We talking embezzled money from work, cheated with his secretary, got a baby on his side piece, went to jail—”

“Wait. That’s some soap opera shit.”

“Oh, believe me. It was OTT drama, but it all happened to Sol,” Hendrix says, a rueful twist to her mouth. “It was hard as hell for her and the girls.”

“You and Yasmen were there for her,” I guess.

“Of course we were. They’re the sisters I never had. We ride for each other always.”

Ms. Pearl approaches the table, balancing loaded white Styrofoam plates on her arms.

“Here we go,” she says, laying out all the plates. A young man comes up behind her and puts the last of the items Hendrix ordered on the table.

“This looks delicious.” I grab the syrup and douse my pecan waffle. “Hungry as hell.”

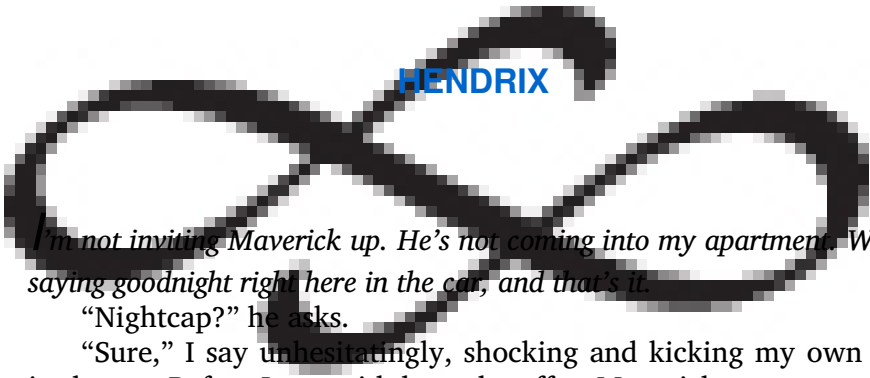
“Me too,” Hendrix says. “Hold up. Be right back.”

She stands, grabs the second All-Star meal she ordered, and speed-walks up the aisle and out the door to the parking lot. When she reaches the Bentley, Matthew rolls down the window, grinning and looking half lovestruck when he accepts the plate of food. He watches her when she walks back to the diner, appreciation in his gaze. I can’t blame him. Even dressed down, she manages to look sophisticated. Fucking forty and looking that young and pretty and fly.

No, I can’t blame Matthew for looking at Hendrix that way, but if he keeps it up, dude will be out of a job. That’s *my* girl.

She just doesn’t know it yet.

CHAPTER 25



HENDRIX

I'm not inviting Maverick up. He's not coming into my apartment. We're saying goodnight right here in the car, and that's it.

"Nightcap?" he asks.

"Sure," I say unhesitatingly, shocking and kicking my own self in the ass. Before I can withdraw the offer, Maverick gets out on his side and quickly crosses around to open the door for me. I stare at his proffered hand like it's a hissing snake instead of a polite way to assist a lady.

"I changed my mind," I blurt. "Maybe we shouldn't—"

"One drink," Maverick says, grasping my hand and tugging until I get out of the car. When I step down, he doesn't step back, and there's little to no space separating us. The heat coming off our bodies is not just physiological, not generated from mere metabolism or circulation or the mechanics of keeping us alive. The *air* is alive between us. It breathes. It seethes. It has a pulse that pounds loud in my ears every second we stand too close.

"Uh, okay." I'm still holding his hand and drop it like a live grenade. "One drink."

I step around him and away from the Bentley SUV.

Which, by the way, is the most baller vehicle I've ever been in. I know it's rented while he's in Atlanta and doesn't actually belong to Maverick, but this is indicative of how this man lives. As if the private box at the NBA playoffs, chartered plane, and Miami mansion didn't already give it away. I've dated rich men before, but Maverick is a whole new level. But his bottom line is not even close to being the most attractive thing about him. I've never felt this

connected, this drawn to a man before.

Can't have him. Can't have him. Can't have him.

The reminder singsongs in my head as we take the elevator up to my apartment. The ride is quiet, the air charged but slick, dripping with desire, longing. Hell, I don't know what to call it, but every molecule of my body is tuned to his. Magnetized. This has been building, not just all night, but since the moment we met at his party. I keep my eyes trained on the climbing numbers taking us to my place, even as I feel his stare boring into my profile. Fixed on me.

The ding of the elevator arriving at my floor and the doors opening jolt me into action.

"You know," I say, turning to press my back against the door to my apartment, "it's been a long night. I'm stuffed from all that food. Aren't you stuffed? I'm thinking we skip the drink. Thanks for walking me up, but—"

"Hen." He takes a step closer, sandwiching me between his body and the door. "Let me in. Ten minutes. Please."

The air in my lungs gathers and hovers like a storm cloud, and I nearly choke on how bad I want to close those last few inches between us. To feel him go hard against me.

"Ten minutes," I finally breathe out, resigned and knowing I'll regret this. "One drink."

As soon as we're on the other side of the door, he takes my wrist and guides me to the couch. We sit side by side, and he holds my hand loosely in his.

I glance from our joined hands to the bar. "What about your drink?"

"I'm not wasting my ten minutes on liquor." He leans forward a little, tilting his head to catch my eyes. "Let's talk, Hen. Like really talk."

"What do we need to talk about?"

"I have a dilemma, and I was hoping you could help me."

My brows bunch, and I'm surprised by the direction of the conversation. "What's the dilemma?"

"How do I get you to give me a chance? Knowing that the situation with Zere is potentially messy and awkward… How do I get you to give me a chance anyway?"

"You don't," I answer without missing a beat, eyes never leaving his to make sure he knows I mean this. "I'm not choosing

you over my show."

"I'm not asking you to choose *me* over the show. I want you to consider *us* and what that could look like, if it might be worth at least trying."

"I barely know you." As soon as the words hit the air they sound like a lie. There is a knowing between us that I try to ignore and disregard. "Yet you want me to give up a dream of mine for years?"

"I'm absolutely not asking you to give up anything for me." He frowns, gently tightening his fingers around mine when I try to pull away. "I wouldn't do that. I'm just asking if we could find a solution to this dilemma."

"*Your* dilemma." I snatch my hand from his. "Not mine."

"So you're not attracted to me." His brows lift. His words matter-of-fact.

"It's irrelevant."

I stand, and he does, too, bringing our bodies close again. He has a couple of inches on me, but I barely have to look up for our eyes and our lips to align. He grips my waist with one hand and threads his fingers with mine using the other. The look in his eyes intoxicates me. It's a cocktail of affection and desire and impatience.

"Hen," he says, leaning forward so his breath mists my lips. "You're telling me something that fees like *this* is irrelevant?"

The intensity of emotion in his gaze blazes through my rationale and my reasons. I want to look away and hold on to the excuses I've been rehearsing of why this can never happen. The heat rising between our bodies melts everything except the centripetal force, impelling us to meet, to clash.

The kiss starts so quickly I'm not sure who initiates it. Maybe neither of us did consciously, but it explodes before I have time to prepare. Our mouths are open and desperate and searching. I wish I could say I'm not a willing participant, but that's impossible since I'm sucking on his bottom lip and gripping his neck to pull him in deeper. He groans against my mouth, his hand roaming down my back, squeezing my waist. The plunging lash of his tongue *over and over and over* is a hungry rhythm I match lick for lick.

Without breaking the kiss, he guides us back and down to the couch, pulling me to straddle his lap. I follow without hesitation, whimpering at the feel of him, a hard column between my legs.

Panting breaths mingle between our lips as I press down and he pushes up, a glorious grinding I have dreamed of more than one lonely night in my empty bed. Big hands slide from my waist down to squeeze my ass, then drag over my bare legs in long strokes. Layers of our clothing—the silk of panties, the roughness of denim—incinerate with the pace of our bodies twisting to find more friction. It shouldn't feel this good, just the repetition of my hips moving over him, but wetness pools in my underwear and my muscles tighten. I hump him harder, faster, chasing that nirvana that only comes when—

"Shit." I break our kiss to rest my forehead against his. "Mav, I'm gonna…"

My words are swallowed by a wave of pleasure swelling from the center of my body, and every thought is drowned. Every reason this isn't a good idea, capsized in the torrent of this thing I can't deny. I lower my head to his neck, hiding my face as my body quakes with release.

He grabs and lifts my chin, trapping my gaze with his.

"Show me," he says, his voice harsh, edged with his own desperation. "Look me in my eyes when you come for me."

And I do. I don't look away as the pleasure crests and crashes over me, wresting a moan from my throat and tremors from my body. Never removing one article of clothing, looking into his eyes this way, I'm completely exposed, my desire undeniable and on full display. But I'm not alone. An almost-pained grimace twists his even features as he struggles for control. Harsh breaths push past his lips. He doesn't avert his stare. He shows me everything—the desire and the restraint required not to take me. It makes me want him more.

He clasps my neck and brings my head down so our lips crash. I know I should pull away, but my arms slip over his shoulders and I cup his head in my trembling hands, deep diving into the kiss. I meet him stroke for stroke, my tongue seeking his and exploring the lining of his mouth for any spot I might have missed.

I don't know how long the kiss would have lasted if he didn't slide his hands down so his thumbs frame my neck, pressing against the frantic pulse before he tears his lips away with obvious reluctance. The rough pad of his thumb caresses my bottom lip. With his finger he nudges my chin up so our eyes meet, his somehow already possessive even though I haven't given him

anything yet. He tugs one of the braids resting on my shoulder and runs the back of his hand over my cheek.

"Now about my dilemma," he says, his voice controlled even over his ragged breaths.

I could easily assume with that comment he's making light of the situation since I obviously caved and orgasmed all over his lap, but his expression remains unsmiling. I scoot back and off him to stand. Composure shaken, I stride over to the bar and reach for a bottle of tequila.

Yeah, it's like that.

"You want something?" I toss the words over my shoulder as I pour myself a shot, the best I can do on such short notice.

"You know what I want."

I still, the shot glass trembling in my unsteady hands. I set the glass and the bottle down and close my eyes.

"I'm not doing this," I grit out, refusing to look at him lest I mount him again and go grinding for round two. "I've seen women make this mistake too many times. Choose good dick right now over what's best for them in the long run."

"You haven't even tried it yet," he says, some degree of levity finally threading through his voice. "How do you know it's good?"

"Don't." I turn to face him and shove my hands in my pockets. "Don't play with me right now."

"The way I want you," he says, the tiny trace of humor disintegrating. "What I want with you—that shit's serious. I'm not playing, Hen."

"Do you think Zere will work with me on this show if we start…" I gesture toward the sectional, the scene of our hunching crime. "Doing that? It's not just me to consider. Chapel deserves this chance."

"And do *you* think Zere is the only way you can get a TV show made?" He stands and walks over to me, his gait confident and powerful.

"What do you want?" he asks, stopping in front of me, cupping my face and holding my eyes. "I'll get it for you."

I jerk away, his words like a bucket of cold water on my overheated body.

"Why do I need you to get something for me I'm already doing for myself?" I snap. "What? I bet everything on *you*? Fuck you for a few months till you're bored and off to the next supermodel,

meanwhile I've ruined something I actually worked for and earned on my own?"

"I didn't mean it like that." He rubs a hand over the back of his neck and blows his frustration out on an extended breath. "I shouldn't have made it sound like… I respect your work and your choices, Hendrix."

"I like Zere. When a lot of people would have written Chapel off for her differences, she saw her light the way I do. We both believe in her and think this show could do something really special, that women out there who haven't been affirmed will see themselves on-screen as beautiful and worthy when they see Chapel. Zere and I share a vision for that. I want to do this show with *her*."

"Zere's amazing. I never said she wasn't, and I think she'd be the perfect partner, but she shouldn't be able to dictate your private life."

"Not even when my 'private life' is with the man she's still in love with?"

"She's not," he scoffs. "We broke up a full month before that party in Miami."

"What?" I do math in my head, retabulating everything I thought I knew about their history. I suspected they'd broken up before the press release, of course, but a full month?

"Yeah, and things had been falling apart for a long time before that," Maverick presses on. "Because we fundamentally wanted different things and came to a fork in the road. We couldn't escape that reality anymore."

"Just because she chose having a family over having you doesn't mean she's *over* you or that she'd be okay with us seeing each other."

"How will you know if we don't even ask?" He caresses my cheek, his touch firm and gentle on my skin.

I jerk back, afraid that if I allow even that simple touch, it won't stop there.

"As soon as I ask, everything changes, Mav." I shake my head. "No, it breaks girl code."

"You're a grown-ass woman, Hendrix, not a girl. And isn't girl code for friends? I've known Zere for years, and I'd never heard your name before that party. You are, at best, business associates beginning a friendship."

"You think those technicalities will make a difference when it

comes down to it?"

"She was out with some other dude just days ago. She's moved on. I'm ready to move on," he says. "Look, I didn't think I'd want this again, a relationship yet, but I met you. That changed everything."

Hearing that makes me want to melt, but I steel myself against his arguments and the emotions. There was a tiny part of me that dared to hope when I saw Zere dating again, but I'm not convinced it will make a difference. And I don't think I could blame her if she objected to me starting with her ex. I'd probably feel the same way in her position.

"I really didn't mean to sound like some sugar daddy who thinks he can buy your way into television." There is self-deprecation in the twist of his lips and his sigh. "I know you'd never look for that. I respect what you're doing. Hell, why do you think I want you? Besides being gorgeous, you're brilliant and generous and principled and industrious."

This man could talk me into my own bed if I let him. It would probably be the best sex of my life. He would probably be the best at many things, only making it harder to walk away when I need to. And walking away from a man, putting my needs first, has never been a problem for me. I won't start now.

I walk briskly to the door and open it wide.

"There are plenty of other women who are all those things," I say, nodding toward the empty hall. "I'm sure one of them will be more than happy to fuck you and let you buy them a career in television 'cause it won't be me."

"Hendrix, don't—"

"Do you not see this door standing wide-open?" I firm my mouth, still swollen from his kisses. "Your ten minutes have *been* up."

He walks over, stopping directly in front of me, frustration and something like longing in his stare. "If you don't give us a chance, then how can you—"

"I don't think we should talk anymore. Skipper and Bolt can handle correspondence for Aspire, if you ever did actually want to invest." I narrow my eyes, one hand going to my hip. "Or was that just another way you thought you could 'help' meet my goals on the road to fucking me?"

He flinches, but smooths his features out, molds them into the

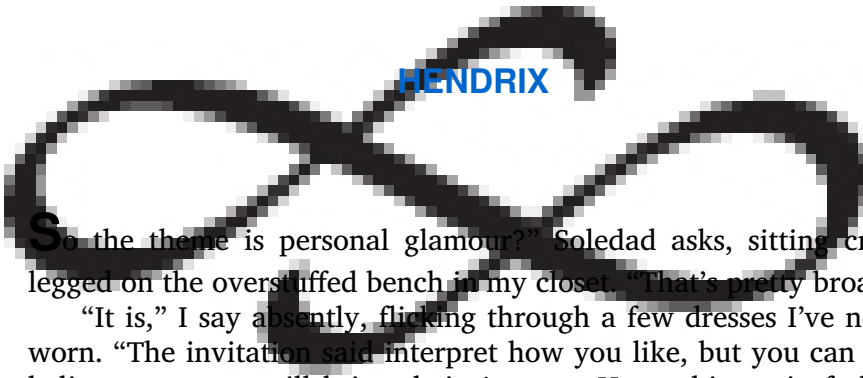
mask he shows the world. “That’s really not fair and I think you know it.”

He leans toward me, and I stiffen but don’t push him away. He dips until his lips brush my ear with a whisper, sending shivers skittering down my spine.

“You know it’s real, Hendrix, and if you think anything you’ve said has changed my mind about us, I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

He drops a quick kiss on my mouth and draws back, resting a finger on my lips before I can voice any protest. He surprises me with a genuine smile, something like anticipation in his eyes. “Because I’m just getting started.”

CHAPTER 26



HENDRIX

"So the theme is personal glamour?" Soledad asks, sitting cross-legged on the overstuffed bench in my closet. "That's pretty broad."

"It is," I say absently, flicking through a few dresses I've never worn. "The invitation said interpret how you like, but you can best believe everyone will bring their A game. Heavy hitters in fashion and entertainment will be at Zere's birthday party."

Maverick won't be there, though.

The thought has intruded on my peace of mind ever since he left my apartment last night. I practically kicked him out, but have been aching ever since. I stuff that unwanted emotion down and hold a sequined minidress against my chest, the electric blue almost hurting my eyes under the overhead lights.

"What do we think?" I ask, standing in a nude bra and underwear. "Too bright?"

Soledad squints exaggeratedly. "I think that dress took me down to twenty-fifty vision."

"Shut up." I laugh, tossing the dress on top of her head and turning back to my seemingly bottomless selection of clothes.

"You live in a loft apartment and your closet is bigger than mine in a six-bedroom house."

"Well, this was originally a guest room, remember? I have more clothes than guests, so this room got remodeled to suit ya girl's needs." I study the glass-enclosed cubbies that hold my myriad shoes. "I need to find those Rene Caovilla sandals. These are alphabetized, but I don't see the ones I'm looking for. Now where did I—"

My cell rings in my pocket before I can finish the thought. I pull it out and frown down at the screen.

"It's the front desk. Probably those wings we ordered."

"I could've made my famous pineapple habanero wings with my special sauce." Soledad shimmies her shoulders and preens.

"All your food can't be famous, and all your sauces can't be special."

"Have you ever tasted anything of mine that wasn't special?" She folds her arms, her expression smug. "I'll wait."

"Lawd, spare me this woman and her culinary ego." I answer the call. "Yes, hello."

"Delivery for you, Ms. Barry," the attendant says. "Buzz them up?"

"Of course. Thank you." I replace the phone in my pocket and turn back to survey the dresses. "The party is next week so I want to figure this out in case I need to buy something new. I just have so many clothes I've never worn, I figured I'd start here."

"No one would ever accuse you of being frugal," Soledad drawls, rolling her eyes.

"They better not." I affect being affronted. "And ruin my rich auntie rep?"

The doorbell sounds and Soledad hops up. "I'll go get these subpar wings you insisted on subjecting us to."

Chuckling, I dig through the stack of clothes piling up on the center table until I find my silk robe and slip it on.

"Hendrix!" Soledad calls from downstairs. "I think you wanna come down."

"I am." I tie the robe at my waist. "Just gimme a sec."

I start down the stairs, but halt halfway at the sight waiting below.

My living room is overflowing with roses. Huge, oversized bouquets of roses. Not pink or peach, but some soft, sweet marriage of the two colors. And the young delivery guy keeps bringing them in.

"Oh, my God." I cover my mouth with both hands. "What is this?"

"Roses!" Soledad squeaks, bouncing on her toes.

"But where'd they all come from?" I resume my walk down the stairs slowly.

"There's a card." Soledad waves a tiny white envelope above

her head and swings her little hips from side to side in a jig of glee.

As soon as I'm close enough, I snatch the card from her hand, playfully baring my teeth at her. "Gimme that. Mine, I believe."

"I wanna see," she whines. "Who sent them?"

As soon as I take it, the card feels like it's imprinting on my hand. I don't have to open it. I know the roses are from Maverick. My stupid heart does this floaty thing, rising to the top of my chest like a buoy and bobbing along the surface of my common sense.

"Could you sign for them?" The out-of-breath delivery guy asks once the last of them are inside the apartment.

"Sorry. Sure." I take his pen and sign. "Just lemme grab my purse."

"Oh, no." He shakes his head, adamant and grinning widely. "Strict instructions not to accept any tip. Believe me. It's taken care of."

"Okay, well, thank you."

"And we'll send someone out next week to dispose of them," he adds.

"I've never heard of that," Soledad says, her nose buried in a bouquet on the kitchen counter. "I didn't know that was a thing."

"For the right price," he says. "It can be."

He gives us a little salute and leaves.

I consider the roses overtaking every clear surface in the room. I should be pissed. I told Maverick no, but does he respect my wishes? Give me the space I obviously needed? No.

And yet I'm fighting an irrepressible grin as I walk through a forest of scented petals.

"Champagne roses," Soledad says, rubbing one of the petals between her thumb and forefinger. "Symbolizing charm and grace, but also giving rich-lady vibes."

I stare down at the card, not wanting to see, but driven by curiosity to rip it open.

"You're killing me, Hen," Soledad groans. "Open the card."

"Oh, yeah, right." I say it like it's not the absolute only thing on my mind. I casually slide my fingernail beneath the small flap and extract the card.

Just getting started, Gorgeous.

—Mav

Soledad snatches the card from my nerveless fingers and swiftly stutter-steps from the kitchen counter into the living room.

“Ohhh!” Soledad gasps, her wide eyes pinging from the card to my face and back again. “Mav as in Maverick Bell?”

“The one and only.” I fall onto my sectional, taking emotional support from the familiar cushions.

“I think it’s time for an update.” Soledad sits beside me and tucks one leg beneath her. “The last time we discussed Mr. Bell, he was firmly in the ‘just friends’ category.”

“Yeah, about that.” I fold my lips in and recall the way Maverick sucked them like they were the sweetest delicacy. “So last night, he came into town.”

“Okay.”

“And then we went to the Waffle House.”

“Interesting choice for a man who could buy out Waffle House,” Soledad says. “But continue.”

“And then we came back to my place. Here. And we…”

I bury my face in my hands, cheeks heating not with embarrassment, but with the memory of those moments when I gave myself over to the passion that consumed every rational thought.

“We may have, you know, done some dry-humping.”

“Dry-humping?” Soledad places both feet on the floor and leans forward.

“Is it still considered dry-humping if you come?” I risk a mischievous look at my friend. “’Cause lemme tell you, it was one of the best orgasms of my *life*.”

“On this couch where I’m sitting?” Soledad leaps to her feet. “Ewww, Hen. I need to disinfect.”

“Girl, sit down.” I grab the belt loop of her jeans and pull her back to the sectional. “There were no fluids released on this couch so calm yourself, Mrs. Mayer.”

“So not just friends, huh?”

“We are. I really want us to be because he…” I swallow and eye the card on the coffee table. “His friendship has come to mean a lot to me. I love talking to him, but it can’t be more than that.”

“Because of Zere?”

My eyes fly up to meet hers. “Of course because of Zere. I mean, maybe she is dating, but I think she’d feel some type of way if anything happened with Maverick and me this soon.”

“And if she wasn’t a factor?”

I don’t even want to speculate about that. I can’t allow myself

to entertain any reality where I could give in to this.

"But she is, and I won't endanger Chapel's chances, or my chances for that matter, at getting this TV show made. She's worked hard and she deserves this opportunity."

"You deserve it, too," Soledad says softly, "but you are someone who deserves all things, not just one."

"What does that mean?" I ask, almost afraid to hear her explanation.

"I know you don't want kids, and that's fine. I get it. I respect it. I believe it." Soledad pauses. "But you've never said you don't want a partner."

"No, because I do. The *right* partner, not just settling for someone because everyone thinks there's a clock ticking." I suck my teeth. "Fuck that. I'm not interested in spending one day with someone not worth my time, much less years."

"Guess I'm a cautionary tale on wasting years with a trash man, huh?" Soledad looks down at the slim fingers settled serenely in her lap.

"I didn't mean it like that, Sol." I reach over and grab her hand. "I know Edward wasn't like that when you first met. And he hid so much from you for so long."

I hate the thought of Soledad feeling even an ounce of shame when there's no woman I admire more, considering all she has achieved and how far she has come on her own.

"Honey, I'm fine," Soledad laughingly assures me, bringing my knuckle up for a quick kiss. "I got my man now, the right one. And let me tell you, ain't nothing like the right one."

I nod my agreement as if I understand, but if I'm honest, no one has ever felt right.

Not until…

No one except…

"Do you remember what you told me when I was about to ruin everything with Judah because I was so hung up on making sure I had my shit all the way sorted and healed before starting another relationship?"

"Vaguely? I mean, obviously it would have been something brilliant and wise because it's me," I joke. "But the specifics are hazy."

"Well, I remember." Soledad's already soft expression goes even softer, even sweeter. "You said Judah might seem to be the wrong

person for me. I mean, he *did* send my husband to prison."

"An act of valor, if you ask me," I say, and we both laugh.

"So he seemed to be the most wrong person imaginable," Sol continues, "but you said it sounded like the universe delivered exactly the right one because of how he loved me, understood me."

"I said that?"

"Sure did, and you know what else you said?"

"Wow, I was really on a roll, huh? What other pearls of wisdom did I drop?"

"You said being whole means acknowledging all our parts. And that there were parts of me that wanted to be held, want to be needed and loved." She pauses and searches my face. "I know there's a part of you that wants to be a successful producer, to fulfill those ambitions, but is it at the cost of the other parts? The parts that might want something else? That might want *someone*? Will you have to sacrifice those other parts for this one?"

I keep my face smooth, but there is a spinning top in my head, scattering my thoughts with every rotation.

"There was one last thing you said," Soledad continues softly.

"Well, damn," I say with a shaky laugh. "Did you record this conversation?"

"No, but I replayed it over and over in my head. It was the nudge I needed to pursue the love of my life, so it stuck with me."

"What did past Hendrix tell you, in her infinite wisdom?"

"You said *don't throw it away. Give it a chance*."

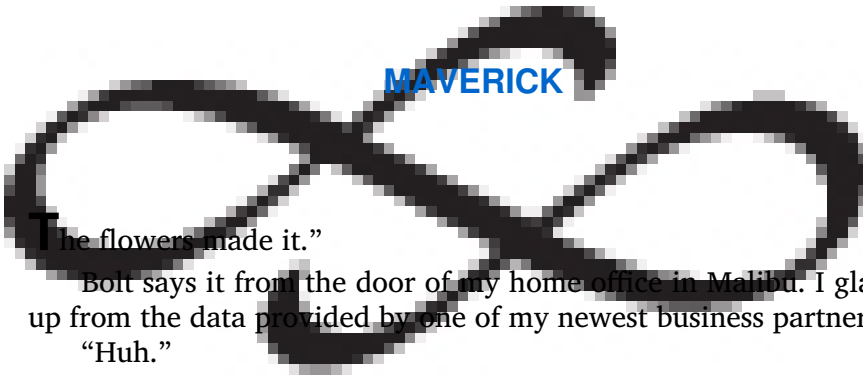
I absorb the words, an echo of advice I shared that helped my girl make the right move and choose the true love of her life when her trauma and uncertainty made her hesitate.

"I said that?" I ask after a few seconds of silence. Soledad's smile is too watery and sweet for my taste so I smirk and say, "Chile, and you listened to *me*?"

"I'm so glad I did. I didn't lose my independence or all the things I'd fought to learn about myself when I chose Judah. I was ready for him *because* of those things." She leans forward to cover my hand with hers, holding my eyes with the compassion and love in hers. "The right one won't ask you to give up your dreams, but will care just as much as you do about them."

Last night, was Maverick asking me to give up my dreams? Or asking to run with me while I chase them?

CHAPTER 27



MAVERICK

"The flowers made it."

Bolt says it from the door of my home office in Malibu. I glance up from the data provided by one of my newest business partners.

"Huh."

I keep it monosyllabic and hope Bolt realizes no further comment is required. He walks into the office and takes the seat across from me while I clack away on my laptop and email a reply to the partner.

"You mentioned sending them to her mother's house when she's there?" Bolt continues.

"Not as many," I say, still not looking up. "But don't order them yet. We'll play it by ear."

"Do we know where her mother lives? When specifically the surgery is? When Hendrix begins her stay in North Carolina?"

"That all sounds like your job," I reply with a grin, sparing him a quick glance before returning to my correspondence.

"I guess the bigger question is if you're sure you know what you're doing."

My fingers still over the keys and a muscle twitches in my jaw. I stop typing and sit back in my chair, hands folded over my stomach. He wanted my attention and that comment got it.

"Meaning what?" I ask.

"We've discussed this before."

"And was it none of your business then, too?"

"Mav, seriously. Zere. Hendrix. This could get really messy."

"I'm aware and also don't care."

“But—”

“The fuck, Bolt,” I snap, dropping all pretense of indifference. “Whose balls did you wake up with to think you can question me?”

He doesn’t flinch at my sharp words, his face as impassive as usual.

“My own balls have always served me just fine,” he says. “But if you’re asking what gave me the audacity to question your current course of action, I guess you did by always encouraging me to speak my mind and to let you know if I see you making a mistake.”

“Hendrix is not a mistake,” I say through tight lips.

“I’m not saying she is, but the timing is inadvisable. Just because Zere went on one date—”

“This isn’t about Zere. I mean, did I feel relieved to see her moving on with someone else? Yeah, sure, but I was already pursuing Hendrix.” I smirk, hoping to ease the tension that has entered the conversation. “At least I know how to use my words and actions to show the woman I want how I feel, instead of dragging her off to fuck her in a closet every time we’re in the same room.”

Bolt’s inscrutable expression cracks, revealing irritation before he quickly smooths his brow and levels out his scowl.

“I don’t want Skipper,” Bolt says evenly.

“Might want to tell your dick that.”

“I have. We’re in agreement now. Those few times—”

“*Few* times?” I cut in, my eyes going wide. “You’ve only met Skipper twice, right?”

There’s complete silence while Bolt flattens his lips and mean mugs me.

“Right?” A laugh rolls out of me and I tip back in my seat. “Shit. Did you creep down to Atlanta for a cross-country hit?”

“It was not a…” Bolt sucks in a sharp breath and meets my eyes. “It was a quick trip, an ill-advised decision that we both regretted later.”

“This was after the playoffs game in the box?”

“Tell me. Do you delve this deeply into all your employees’ personal lives, or am I the only one this fortunate?”

“Only the ones who can’t keep their asses out of *my* personal business and try to tell me I shouldn’t go after the woman I want.”

“It’s not an issue of want. It’s timing.”

“If you wanted someone the way I want Hendrix, then you

would not waste time, and you for damn sure wouldn't be waiting on a green light from your ex. I care about Zere. I respect her and I was faithful to her while we were together, but we aren't together anymore. Period."

My cell rings on my desk, and we both look at it. The screen displays Zere calling.

"Tell her that," Bolt says, allowing himself a grin for the first time since he entered my office—asshole—and then leaves, closing the door behind him.

"Hey," I answer the call. "What's up, Zee?"

"Hi," she replies, her tone formal. "How are you?"

"Can't complain. You?"

"I'm fine, thanks," she says, politeness shrink-wrapping the words. "I wanted to… well, I hadn't gotten a response to the invitation for my fortieth birthday party, so I thought I'd ask if you're a yea or nay."

"Do you really *want* me to come?"

"I wouldn't have invited you if I didn't want you there, Mav," she says, impatience and something more vulnerable in her voice. "It's a big milestone. Of course I want you to come."

"Will your new guy be okay with me attending?" I inject a hint of teasing, hoping she hears that it really doesn't bother me.

"He's not 'my new guy.' One date doesn't mean we're in a committed relationship. He'll be there, but he won't trip if you come, too. It's not like that."

"All right." I nod and close the laptop to give the conversation my focus. "Just want to be respectful."

"Look, you know I was heartbroken when we decided to part ways, but I've done a lot of reflecting. And spent a lot of time with my therapist." She gives a short laugh. "That woman has been working overtime, but she helped me see that the same way it wouldn't be fair of you to expect me to give up my dream of having kids, it's not fair for me to expect you to want something other than what you feel is right for you."

She needed *therapy* to reach that conclusion? Is that what's passing as a breakthrough these days? *Note to self. Pay my therapist more.*

"Look, everyone who is important to me will be there," Zere continues, her tone softening. "That means you, too, doofus."

"Okay. I'll come." I tilt back in my office chair and grin. "And

what am I giving you this year? You'll have to actually tell me instead of leaving clues all over the house so I can figure it out."

It's quiet for a moment. Probably not the best thing to remind her of, but if we're going to actually be friends, we need to move past the awkwardness of our past relationship.

"Just you being there is gift enough," she says, then laughs. "Who am I kidding? You know you better come correct for the four-oh. Figure it out on your own. Bolt will help you. I only ask that you choose it yourself. Okay?"

"I can do that. And, uh, who's coming? Anyone I actually like?" I fish, wondering if she'll mention the name I'm hoping to hear.

"Of course there will be people you actually like. Well, a few at least," she says with a giggle. "You like Hendrix, right?"

I almost choke at the unexpected question.

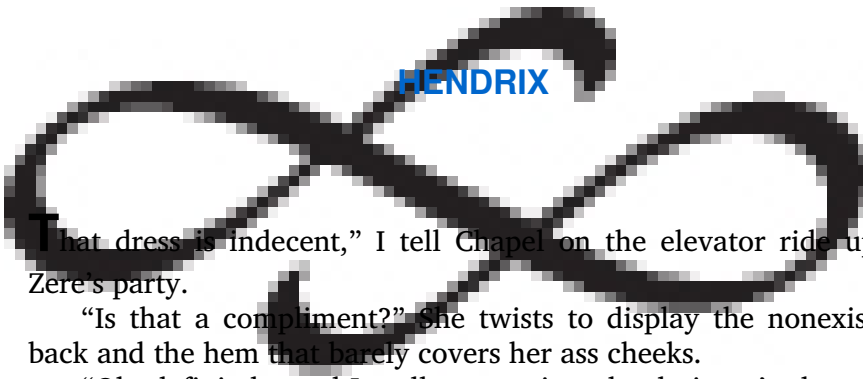
"I mean, she said you're involved with her venture capital fund," Zere goes on. "I assumed you liked her, but if you don't, I can—"

"I do. I do like her. She's cool." My hand tightens around the phone, but I keep my tone casual. "She's coming?"

"Yup, she and Chapel both are."

I'm glad when Hendrix asked, I was vague about whether I'd attend the party. I want to see her again, and this may be my best chance.

CHAPTER 28



HENDRIX

"That dress is indecent," I tell Chapel on the elevator ride up to Zere's party.

"Is that a compliment?" She twists to display the nonexistent back and the hem that barely covers her ass cheeks.

"Oh, definitely, and I really appreciate the designer's clever use of floss to almost cover your nipples."

"The cameras outside were eating it up." Chapel cups her breasts, nearly overflowing the dress's minuscule bodice. "You got it, flaunt it. This is flauntation at its finest, baby girl."

"Work it then," I say, balancing the square box holding Zere's birthday gift against my hip.

"Dayuuuuum, you look good, too, Hen. Them thighs is thighing. Got your legs all greased up."

I kick up one heel playfully. "Thank ya!"

The corseted dress I found at a plus-sized boutique in Buckhead has a tulle skirt that bells out and hits around mid-thigh. It's strapless, the palest violet, and makes me feel like a princess. The purple ribbons of snakeskin Rene Caovilla stiletto sandals climb around my calves like vines. My pedicure is adorned with a sequin on each big toe.

"You trying to wrap them legs 'round somebody by the end of the night?" Chapel faces the wall, lifts one leg, and twerks. "'Cause I know I am! Ayeeeee!"

"The only thought I had about these legs was the chafing stick I used between them so I can dance freely." I toss a long curtain of hair over my shoulder. "If I can get used to this wig. I never wore

this much hair in my life."

"Both of us went for middle part, bussdown." Chapel shakes the long pink hair flowing down her back. "You need to pull something tonight. You looking a lil' pale, sis. When was the last time you had some vitamin *D*?"

"It's been too long," I admit ruefully as the elevator doors open. "I been in the BYOO club."

"BYOO?"

"Bring your own orgasm."

We high-five and cackle.

"That'll do in a pinch," Chapel says, the humor still lingering on her glossy lips. "But I want somebody's actual mouth on my actual pussy tonight." She surveys the mass of bodies already dancing to "Big Poppa" when we step into the ballroom. "'Cause I see some ladies tonight that should be having my baby."

"You so crazy, but for real, let me know if you leave without me. I don't want to be wondering if somebody snatched your lil' ass."

"All right, Mom," Chapel says with a fake pout. "And please remember this is a party, not office hours. Don't be networking and shit all night. Have fun. Get turnt. Do not waste that dress and that wig on good behavior."

The opening beats of Faith Evans's "Love Like This" drops, and it sets off a bomb in the crowd. Arms lift and sway in a hip-hop hallelujah, hips start winding, and in just a few notes, Faith's honeyed voice downshifts the party from hype to a vibe. It's one of my favorite songs, and as soon as I drop Zere's gift off at the table in the entrance, I hit the dance floor, barely making sure Chapel is with me. She'd better keep up or find her own groove because this—when this song right here hits—is mine.

It takes about 2.4 seconds for some dude to dance up on me and grind his half-mast dick into my ass. It is wall-to-wall bodies in here, so some contact is unavoidable, but his breath is on my neck. I did not spritz Valentino all over just to smell like whatever cheap-ass cologne he bathed in.

"Excuse me," I say, thrusting an elbow back into his ribs. "I think you and your erection need to sit this one out."

He releases a *hhhhmph* at the jab, and miraculously I'm free to grind and roll without his hard-on as my partner. Chapel finds her way to me and we dance through three more songs, chatting as

people walk up to us. Ever since the Miami party, Chapel's profile has risen. Part of that is being associated with Zere. Chapel has been invited to all the right events, been seen in all the cool places with powerful, popular people. But it's not just association. It's what she does with the spotlight, even if it's for only a few seconds. She stands out. She shines. She makes you remember her. And she's right. This is a party, but my office is always open so my eyes are peeled for her next opportunity.

"This DJ is good," Chapel yells to be heard over the music. "His mixology game is strong."

"Yeah, I need to pace myself." I lean in to her ear. "These shoes did not come with Megan Thee Stallion knees, so I'm gonna grab a drink and sit my ass down for a few minutes."

Chapel looks over my shoulder and flashes a salacious grin, licking her lips invitingly. I glance in that direction and am not sure if it's the girl, the guy, or the both she's scoping as her conquest for the night, but I want to get out of the line of fire.

"You know where to find me," I tell her, heading for one of the few empty spots on a couch against a wall of windows overlooking the New York city skyline. It's a sheet of midnight velvet sprayed with shattered glass stars. I don't know what glitters brighter, the stars on that side of the window or this one. Everywhere I look there's an A-list celebrity. Zere definitely knows how to party, and her fortieth birthday celebration is an epic affair. It's such a crush of people, I haven't seen her, but as soon as I sit down, she dashes over and settles beside me.

"Hey, Hen!" she squeals, pulling me into a seated side hug. "Thank you for coming."

"It's the birthday girl!" I squeeze her and smile. "You look beautiful as usual."

"Not a day over forty, huh?" A tiara nestled among her golden-brown curls sparkles. She's as svelte in her body-molding dress as she was in photos from twenty years ago.

"Happy birthday, Zere. I truly hope you get all you deserve."

"Thank you. I'm so glad we've become friends over the last few months."

Guilt twists my insides at the word "friends." According to girl code, you don't dry-hump a friend's ex. You don't come all over his lap. And you certainly don't get yourself off in bed every night for a week from the memory of it.

"Me too," I say lamely. "Are you enjoying your party?"

"I am. Everyone's having a great time." Her eyes roam the packed room of beautifully dressed people here to celebrate her life, and her bright expression dims a little. "Well, almost everyone. I haven't seen Mav yet."

It's as if she plucked his name from my guilty conscience, and for a moment my tongue clings to the roof of my mouth, reluctant to get words out.

"Oh, is he coming?" I ask with a held breath because I don't know what I want her answer to be.

"Supposedly." She shrugs her slim shoulders as if it doesn't matter to her one way or the other, but her eyes tell too much. She wants him here.

I didn't acknowledge the flowers Maverick sent with even a text to thank him. I gave him my answer, which is no. If I have any hope of standing by that decision, I need to stay away from him. There have been no more text messages. No more simul-watching Netflix. I've gone cold turkey, and apparently so has he. Besides the 144 champagne roses, he hasn't tried to contact me either. I ignore the hot knot of irrational disappointment. I told him there was no possibility of anything happening between us.

Anything *more* happening.

I would believe he's accepted my decision, except the message on the card makes me think this is a tactical retreat, not surrender.

Just getting started, Gorgeous.

Gorgeous with a capital "G." Like it's not just an adjective, but my name. How he thinks of me.

The flowers' fragrance hung heavy in the air, permeating every corner of my home so that each time I drew a deep breath, I couldn't help but think of Maverick. Had that been his intention? If so, mission accomplished. That man's been living rent-free in my head… and in my bed, if fantasies count.

More of Zere's friends crowd around her, and as the centerpiece of this well-laid table, she glows. Charles, Zere's new real estate mogul companion, brings her a drink and sits beside her. She introduces him and we small talk for a few minutes. He's nice and attractive in a forgettable way. His handsomeness feels factory-made—a man-doll from an assembly line, such a contrast to Maverick. *That* man is handcrafted, the way one-of-a-kind pieces come with a warning that irregularities are to be expected. That

flaws are part of the beauty and signal there is no other in existence exactly like it.

Fearfully and wonderfully made, as my mother might have quoted the Bible to describe him.

With his rugged masculine beauty, maybe only scripture could do him justice.

For a moment I'm deeply sorry for Zere, to have had and lost someone like Maverick and find herself sitting across from *this* guy; a shadow of the man she thought she'd spend forever with.

"He's here!" Zere breathes so softly most probably don't hear her, but I do. And I know exactly who "he" is. And the light in her eyes when she spots him at the entrance twists a knife deeper into my belly. You don't light up that way when someone walks into a room if there aren't still *some* feelings involved.

"You didn't tell me Bell was coming," Charles grumbles, his posture straightening.

"Because it's not a big deal," Zere purrs, squeezing Charles's knee and leaning into his side. "There's no need to be jealous. The media created this narrative that surely things were bad between Mav and me when we broke it off, but I told you we're still friends."

She kisses his cheek. "And only friends."

He links their hands on his knee and nods his acceptance.

I catch most of the low-voiced exchange because I'm sitting beside her. I'm glad I overheard to assuage some of the guilt that's been gnawing at me ever since Maverick left my apartment a week ago. I still don't think it would be wise to get romantically involved with him, especially so soon after their breakup, but I can at least take solace in the fact that Zere does seem to have actually moved on with Charles.

I stare down into my drink, determined not to look at Maverick any sooner than necessary, but I feel the air charge the closer he gets. Whatever it is about him that shifts the gravitational center of every room he enters, I don't think it's merely physical. I think it's as elemental as fire or water or air. Even with his kind of wealth, you can't buy that. It predates currency and outweighs power. It's… him. A confidence I think he'd carry no matter what he did, busting bricks or hauling trash. And when I finally look up from my drink to find him standing right in front of us, it pours off him and I'm soaked in it.

"Happy birthday, Zee," he says, his voice deep and low and

shiver-inducing.

She stands immediately and melts into his hug. The DJ is killing it, blasting pre–Sunken Place Kanye, but even as folks dance to Syleena Johnson belting out "All Falls Down," most are undoubtedly tuned in to the byplay between Zere and her two beaus. One ex and one current. Charles, still seated, stares straight ahead with his fists balled on his knees, tension in his arms and his foot bouncing. Maverick and Zere seem to be the only ones oblivious to the tension, conversing and even laughing easily.

She settles back down on the couch between Charles and me, and he immediately lays a proprietary hand on her knee. Maverick steps in front of me, and the invisible thread that is his sheer force of will pulls my eyes up to meet his. Banked heat burns in his stare. I feel it like breath on my neck, like warm palms caressing my body.

"Hen," he says, my name on his lips smooth as a pearl, but at odds with the barely checked emotion in his eyes. "Hi."

"Mav, hey," I reply as casually as I can manage, offering him a polite smile. "Nice to see you again."

"Oh, that's right," Zere says, turning to Charles. "Mav's helping out with Hendrix's foundation. Isn't that cool?"

"It's actually a venture capital fund," Maverick corrects, sliding his hands into the pockets of his navy-blue suit pants. Gucci, if I'm not mistaken. He wears it with an impeccably tailored jacket to match and an open-collar gray silk shirt. "It's called Aspire."

"Never heard of it," Charles says. "What's your focus?"

"We focus exclusively on Black women founders," I tell him and leave it at that.

"They're doing amazing work," Maverick picks up where I deliberately left off, narrowing his eyes on Charles. "I'm investing, so you'll definitely be hearing more from them. One company in particular has limitless potential. Ever heard of Hue?"

"Hue?" Zere turns a stunned look my way. "I love that line! I've never had a color match so perfect."

"They're doing some revolutionary stuff," I say.

Maverick's eyes are warm on my face, and I can't make myself look away as the air between us heat-hazes. When I break our stare, I shoot a quick glance at Zere to see if she's noticed. Fortunately, she's distracted by someone waving at her from across the room.

"Excuse me, guys," she says, rising. "My party planner

apparently needs me. I'll be right back."

As soon as she steps away, two people approach Maverick. Just like at the All-White Party, a small amoeba of people take shape in his vicinity, eager to pitch him or take advantage of this rare proximity to the kind of power he yields.

This is my chance to break away. I'd thought I might last until they cut the cake, but I really don't want to pretend right under Zere's nose any longer than I have to. I feel like a fraud making polite conversation as if I don't know how Maverick's chiseled features slacken and tighten in passion; don't know the raspy timbre his voice falls to when he's turned on. While Zere's away and Maverick is roped into another conversation, I stand and grab my clutch.

"Leaving?" Charles asks.

"I am. Nice to meet you."

"I'll see you around," he says. "You can bet on that."

"Okay, well let Zere know I had to leave, but wish her the best. I left my gift on the table."

I take swift strides across the ballroom, escaping before Maverick can extricate himself from the conversation. I'm going back to my hotel and ordering a bottle of something sent up to my room. Something to dull this throbbing between my legs and this ache in my chest. I scan the crowd for Chapel, but no sign. I don't see the two people she was leering at earlier either. There could be a threesome already in progress somewhere.

Hovering at the entrance, I want to leave, but also need to make sure Chapel is okay before I go. I'd love to lock myself in a stall for a few minutes and sort my thoughts, but there's a long line for the restroom. My gaze falls on the door of the coatroom, which is, by some miracle, slightly ajar. Before anyone comes, I dash in and close the door behind me. The noise of the music and of my own thoughts dies down as soon as the door shuts. I draw in one deep, cleansing breath after another, hoping to slow my heart's thunderous pace.

Zere didn't seem to notice anything amiss, but I felt obvious. Caught, like if you blew forensic dust over my body, Maverick's handprints would show up clearly on my ass, my back, my thighs. Like just looking at me, everyone would know.

A few lamps illuminate the space with soft light. It's not a true coatroom. More like a makeshift dressing room with a dark-paneled

privacy divider, maybe for changing behind. A small table against the wall holds an ashtray, which indoors feels like an artifact these days, and a whiskey tumbler. There are a few rolling clothes racks lined up with wraps, scarves, and other random items. I set my clutch on the table and take out my phone to try Chapel. The buzz of a text notification startles me so badly I drop my phone. I bend to retrieve it and pause, resting on my haunches as I read the screen.

Chapel: Girl, not one, but TWO! You said let you know if I pulled. Got 'em!

Me: Good for you. Be safe.

Chapel: You still flying out tomorrow?

Me: Yup.

Chapel: You leaving the party soon?

Me: Yup.

Chapel: Alone? Or did you pull?

Me: Alone.

The word "alone" may as well be in all caps, highlighted, underlined it stands out so starkly.

My heart literally burns, and it has nothing to do with the short ribs I grabbed from the hotel's buffet earlier. I have never had with anyone else what I have with Maverick. Not just the sexual attraction… which is not insignificant, but the camaraderie, the aligned values and work ethic. Shared convictions.

The way he makes me feel.

The way he makes me laugh.

The way he makes me think.

God, the way he sees *me*. He's generous. Not even talking about money, but generous with his affection and praise. He's mere yards away, and I'm fleeing in the other direction.

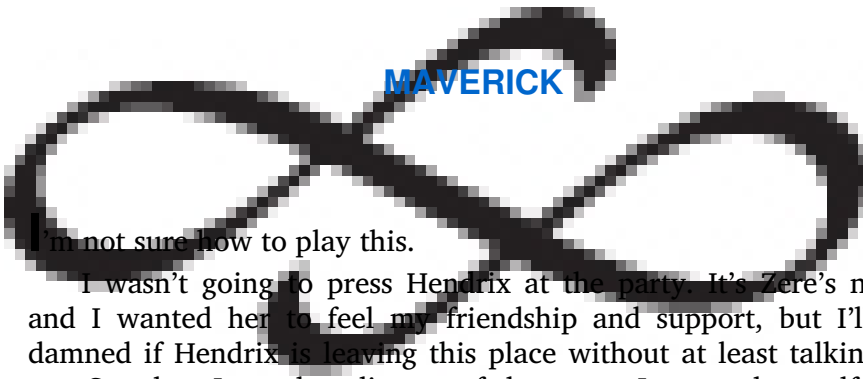
Alone.

I stand, prepared to go, when the door behind me opens and then snicks closed. I don't have to turn around to see who it is. I know how he smells. My atoms ignite and *italicize*, leaning in his direction every time he enters my radius. It's like my body doesn't just know him now, but can predict him. The pull between us is barometric.

I don't make a sound and barely move a muscle, and for a few seconds neither does he, but then he speaks and I even somehow knew exactly what he would say.

"Wagwan, Gorgeous."

CHAPTER 29



MAVERICK

I'm not sure how to play this.

I wasn't going to press Hendrix at the party. It's Zere's night and I wanted her to feel my friendship and support, but I'll be damned if Hendrix is leaving this place without at least talking to me. So when I saw her dip out of the party, I excused myself and told Zere I'd be around. Her new guy visibly relaxed. I wanted to tell Charles there's no need to worry. The woman I want is literally running from me.

"Leaving?" I ask once inside the coatroom. The muscles in her back stiffen as I approach. "Or just hiding from me?"

"Leave me alone, Mav," she says, still not facing me, but turning her head enough to offer a clear view of her profile.

Full glamour tonight, her face is a vibrant palette of rose cheeks and matte red lips and long, fluttery lashes. So different from the fresh-faced woman with two damp braids tucked beneath a baseball cap, laughing with me in Waffle House. Just as beautiful, though. Just as magnetic. I imagine the long hair she wears tonight streaming over us, curtaining us as she takes the top, riding me in my bed. I have Charlotte Thomas sheets, bespoke, literally made to my specifications with twenty-two karat gold woven into the fabric, and I want to see Hendrix come all over them.

"Leave you alone?" I push the stream of long hair aside and over one shoulder to expose her back. "It's too late for that, Hen."

I run the knuckle of my index finger down the shallow basin of her spine. To my fascination, a shiver trembles through her shoulders and goose bumps prickle her arms. She doesn't pull away,

so I risk resting my hands at her hips.

"You look magnificent tonight." I press closer until the curve of her ass rests in the cradle of my hips. I've been hard since the moment I saw her and do nothing to hide the evidence pressing insistently into her softness. She gasps and drops her head forward.

"Mav, we can't…" She lifts her head and looks at me over her shoulder. "We can't do this here."

"Are you saying we can do it somewhere else?" My hands tighten around the lush roundness of her hips, move to palm her waist. "Because my apartment isn't far away."

She turns to face me, stepping back and out of my reach. "We can't do this anywhere, but especially not at Zere's birthday party."

"You got the flowers I sent?"

She frowns, but her expression softens. "They were beautiful. I'm sorry I didn't thank you. It just felt like I should shut everything down for a while."

"It's fine. I figured as much. It seemed like you needed a breath to think about things, so I backed off."

"Thank you. I—"

"But that's over now."

"Mav." She closes her eyes, the lashes long on her rose-dusted cheeks. Her face is a fresco of bold lines and beveled bones and rich pigments. I tip up her chin to get a full view. In her heels she's my height and we look dead into each other's eyes.

"Damn, you're beautiful, Hen."

A slow smile works its way onto her lips. "I thought I was Gorgeous."

"Obviously." I venture a hand back to the curve of her hip and tug her close in cautious inches so she doesn't pull away again. "Zere's new guy is here with her tonight. She invited me to the party. How much more proof do you need that she's moved on?"

"You're not the kind of man a woman gets over quickly," she says, eyes fixed on the top button of my shirt and not meeting my gaze.

"You're speaking theoretically, of course." I tip her chin up with one finger, locking our eyes together and immediately feeling a tightness in my chest at the vulnerability I doubt she wants me to see. "Why don't you try me for yourself?"

"So I can be where Zere is now?" She shifts to free her face from my touch. "Psssh. No, thanks."

My brows snap together. “What does *that* mean?”

“Heartbroken and feeling like she wasted three years of her life.”

“I never misled her and never promised her marriage. Things started disintegrating between us long before the world knew we were done. We didn’t want the same things.”

“And what do you want from me?”

“If I lied and said I just want to fuck you, would you come home with me?”

She smirks. “Maybe.”

I lean close, letting my lips brush her ear. “Then I just want to fuck you.”

Her scent, the warmth of her skin, drugs me. I drop my head and press my mouth to the curve of her neck and across her bare shoulder.

“Mav,” she moans, leaning into my kisses.

I thread our fingers together and pull her closer. “I missed you this week, Hen.”

She nods. “Same.”

With my hand splayed at the small of her back, I kiss up the satiny column of her neck, over her chin until I reach her mouth. I expect resistance, but she’s already open for me, and our tongues meet in a starved tangle. She tastes of champagne—expensive and heady and effervescent—the kiss a swirl of decadence. I’m desperate, both hands reaching for her butt and squeezing hard.

“This ass,” I groan. “Fuck. And your legs and your…” I dip to the tops of her breasts, sucking the plumpness into my mouth and then running my tongue into her cleavage. Her scent is intense trapped between the full curves. Eyes locked with hers, I peel the bodice down a little, watching to see if she protests. My mouth is already watering for the first sight of her nipples, but instead there’s another layer of satiny fabric.

“Shapewear,” she laughs. “You think my body is naturally this smooth and tight? Sorry to disappoint.”

“I’m not disappointed. Just determined.” I reach around and find a zipper for the shapewear, pulling it down along with the dress until both pool at her waist. Her breasts are big and crowned with fat nipples the color of blackberries against her cocoa skin. I cup them, testing the weight in my palms, tracing the tips with my thumbs. She draws in a sharp breath and her head tips back,

exposing the long line of her throat.

"Shit, Hen." I don't even sound like myself. My voice is a strangled stranger.

"You like them?" Hendrix raises her head and her eyes reflect the desperate heat of my own passion. The need to taste her steals rational thought, and I don't care that the party is in full swing just beyond this coatroom. I don't care that there's no lock on the door. I dip my head and take one nipple into my mouth.

"Jesus, Mav," Hendrix gasps. Her hands palm my head, and I don't know if she'll push me away or pull me in. With a broken sigh, she presses me closer, and it's all the signal I need. I lave her nipples, discovering the velvety texture with just the tip of my tongue for a few blissful seconds.

"Don't stop." Hendrix's words ride a breathy moan.

I suck one nipple into my mouth, gentle at first, but then hard enough to hollow out my cheeks. I rub the other between my thumb and forefinger, and it hardens under my touch. Sade's "The Sweetest Taboo" seeps through the walls, and it's in perfect tune with the first time I have her this way because she tastes forbidden on my tongue, but not wrong. So fucking *right* like my skin has been waiting, the most sensitive nerves dormant all my life until they felt her. Like the electrical impulses that make my heart beat were waiting for her, and she is the jolt that startles it into beating for the first time. Like nothing and no one else has been this right until now.

Until her.

I don't even realize I'm grinding against her, but she starts rolling her hips to meet every shallow thrust. Every touch and breath drives the fire between us higher, and I'm on the edge of a cliff, my dick lengthened and hard. I slip my hand under her dress, only to encounter the shapewear again instead of flesh.

"Hen, I want to touch you." Frustration claws at me when my fingers caress the edge of the satin around her thighs. "Need to taste you."

"Mav." She drops her head to mine, pressing our foreheads together. "We can't. Not here."

Desperate, I take her hand and pull her behind the changing screen. The privacy it affords is flimsy, but everyone is out on the dance floor. I don't anticipate being interrupted, but honest to God couldn't give a damn right now if we were. She looks debauched,

breasts out with the dress folded down to her waist and around her hips. Hair spills over her shoulders, and her nipples peekaboo through the long strands. Her lips are pouty, swollen from rough kisses, and I can't resist taking her mouth again. I press her into the wall, one hand above her head and one palming her breast and stroking the hardened tip.

"Oh, God," she pants, fumbling with the dress to shove it down and over her hips. "Mav, please."

The dress pools around her ankles and only the sexy shapewear remains. It's black and shiny, clinging like a second skin to her hips and thighs. I tug it down over the lush curve of her ass until it joins the dress in a heap at her feet.

I wasn't prepared to see her fully naked, but she stands before me in nothing but her stilettos, thick and firm and luminous, the overhead lights kissing her brown skin. She is statuesque glamour stacked into a brickhouse body. Smooth, supple, generous curves accessorized with complete confidence. She stands in the light letting me look my fill. No squirming and shifting. Just tall and proud. It forces me to my knees.

I pull one long leg over my shoulder and take her in for the first time. Her pussy is bare and slick, glistening. As soon as I touch the bundle of nerves, she gasps and tosses her head back to thump against the wall.

"Mav," she moans, rolling her hips and twisting her pretty face with desperation. "Come on now. Stop playing."

I blow across her, and chuckle when she tries to nudge my face toward her.

"You not gon' rush me, Hendrix. I've wanted to do this since the moment I met you."

She stares down at me and a frown puckers her sleek brows. "What?"

"Yes," I affirm, running my palm down the smooth skin of her leg, squeezing the plump softness. "As soon as and ever since."

I give us what we both crave, spreading her open and burying my face between her legs. She's whimpering and twisting in my hands, but I hold her still so I can get it exactly the way I want it. She clutches my head, forcing me deeper in and I gladly go, thrusting my tongue inside of her. Pushing two fingers and then three inside, and never letting up.

"Ahhh. You gotta… I need…" She thrashes her head against the

wall, the long hair tumbling around her shoulders. “Mav, damn.”

I feel her release before I taste it. The tremor in her leg as it almost buckles. The way her fingers tighten in my hair, tugging until it hurts. I want to taste her forever.

She pants above me, her breasts heaving like we’ve run a mile. I let her leg slide off my shoulder and stand, pressing her into the wall, wrapping my hand around her throat and crashing my mouth down on hers. She bites my lips, chases my tongue, licks my teeth and the lining inside my jaw. It’s a feral kiss, both of us drunk on the taste of her, on the taste of our mingled passion. The need to be inside of her is locomotive. A driving, churning ache that must be relieved.

I turn her to face the wall, slipping my fingers between her legs and pushing back inside. Her gasps and moans encourage me to push in another.

“I want to fuck you, Hen.”

She flattens her hands to the wall and pushes back onto my hand.

“Do it,” she chokes out. “Hurry up.”

“You want it?” I ask, releasing one finger to caress between her legs.

She drops her head to the wall and swivels into the contact, increasing the pressure of my finger on that bud of nerves.

“Yeah,” she almost slurs, sounding as drunk as I feel. “Please.”

I pull my fingers out and touch them to my lips.

“You taste so damn good,” I groan.

She presses her ass back against me restlessly. “Come on, Mav.”

I push the hair aside and over her shoulder, taking in the long expanse of her flawless back and the exaggerated jut of her ass from her waist. My hands actually shake when I get my pants open and down. I nudge her feet wider and with one hand angle her hips back so I can push up and into her. I slide in smoothly, perfectly. We both gasp when her body clenches around me.

“Fuuuuuck.” The word erupts from me and I tighten my hands at her hips. “I’m raw.”

She reaches behind us and grabs my ass, pressing me deeper inside. Her body greedily sucks me in, and a groan pushes past my lips.

“I’ve been tested,” she pants. “And I’m on birth control, but I don’t… we can’t—”

“I’ll pull out,” I cut in, breathing heavily at her neck. I don’t want her worrying about anything except how good this feels. “I’m negative, too, but I’ll still pull out.”

Every thrust drives me deeper inside, and it’s not just her body clamping around me every time I push in and withdraw. What’s happening between our bodies is only a portion of it. Something connective is growing between us. Every gasp and moan knits it. Strengthens it.

The door swings open and we both freeze. I’m still buried so deep, Hendrix whimpers when I shift the slightest bit. I curl my hand around her mouth to stifle her cries. The screen barely covers us, and one sound would alert whoever just entered of our presence.

“I hate to leave early,” a woman drawls. “But I have a flight to catch.”

“No problem,” a man answers. “You have your ticket?”

My hips are flush to Hendrix’s ass, barely a breath separating our bodies as we wait, holding our cries captive. Her pussy spasms around me and I have to move, just little thrusts that make her bite into my hand. Finally the door closes behind the two guests, and Hendrix pushes against me, reaching one hand back to grip the back of my neck.

“Get it, Mav,” she moans. “Shit.”

I pull almost all the way out and then slam inside again. Hendrix pounds her fist lightly against the wall, the movement all the more powerful for its restraint. This is not how I envisioned our first time together—a symphony of muffled cries and suppressed gasps. I wanted to hear her scream my name and see her spread open beneath me. Instead it’s this rushed act that I should have been strong enough to resist, but couldn’t.

Next time I’ll feast on her and she’ll feast on me. I don’t allow myself to think *If I get a next time*. After this, there’s no way I’ll go the rest of my life without having her again.

“Touch yourself,” I command, knowing how close I am. My slow, steady strokes have dissolved into an erratic, frantic rhythm. I can’t hold out much longer. She reaches between her legs and in a few touches, cries out, tensing and clenching around me. I push in deeper, harder.

“Shit, shit, shit,” I chant, losing all sense of myself for a span of seconds. We could be center stage for all I care.

I pull out just in time to spill into my hand and on her smooth skin, barely resisting the primal urge to smear myself all over her. Bare breasts flattened to the wall, Hendrix tips her head forward. She draws in harsh breaths and her shoulders tremble with the receding wave of our passion. I kiss the curve of her neck and pluck the silk handkerchief from the pocket of my suit to clean us up. I make quick work of it, but she looks over her shoulder and our eyes hold in the intimacy-charged seconds while I set us both to rights.

The first strains of "Happy Birthday" creep under the closed door, snapping us back to the party.

Hendrix turns and pulls away from my touch to gather her discarded clothes.

"I can't believe I did that." She clutches the dress and shapewear to her chest, hiding her luscious breasts from me.

"Regrets already?" I ask.

The answer is in her drawn brows and tight jaw and thinned lips, in the panic coloring her eyes. But I hope she won't say it because the only thing I regret is that we didn't have a bed.

"We can't do this," she says succinctly, stepping into the shapewear and wrenching the dress in place. "This was a mistake."

Her refusal stings. At this stage of my life, I'm not used to being turned down, to not getting what I want; but that's not what scrapes across my nerves. It's that we *both* want this and neither of us is getting what we desire because Zere might not want us to?

"We are adults," I tell her, struggling to tamp down my impatience.

"And as an adult," she replies, twisting one arm behind her to reach the zipper, "I'm saying this can't happen again."

"Let me," I grit out and turn her gently by the shoulder until her back is to me. I force myself to pull it up and tug the dress into place. She moves to step away, but I link my arm around her waist and hold her to me. She stiffens, but after a moment, sinks her back into my chest with a sigh. I caress her arm, dragging my touch down the smooth skin until I reach her hand and thread our fingers together. Her head drops back to my shoulder, and she flicks a sideways glance up to meet mine.

"You feel guilty about what we did, but do you know what's happening when this party's over?" I ask. "Zere's gonna be getting hers with Charles, not thinking about me, and my ass'll be at home in bed by myself jerking off and thinking about these."

I slide my hands from her waist to cup her breasts. My mouth waters again and I draw a sharp breath through my nose. Her nipples tighten and go hard under my stroking fingertips.

"Mav," Hendrix whispers.

"And will you be back at your hotel thinking about me? Thinking about how good we are together?" I kiss behind her ear and whisper. "Not just the sex, Hendrix, but how good we would *be* together."

A forced-air breath whooshes across her lips. "Zere is not even fifty feet away and we fucked at her birthday party."

"That's none of her business anymore."

"Easy for you to say. You don't have to work with her. You have nothing to lose."

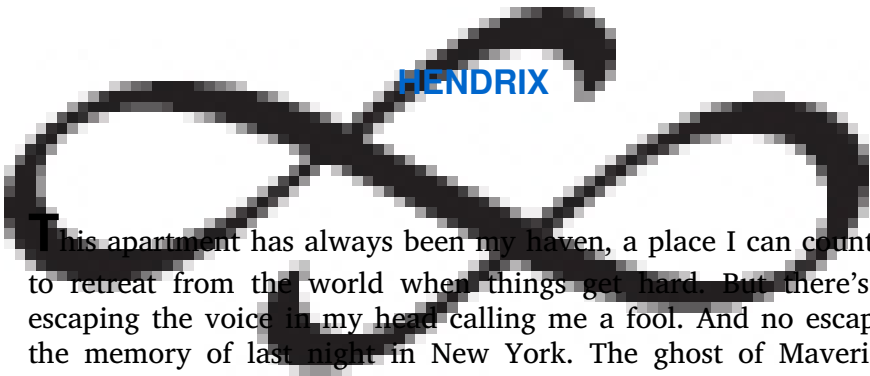
She turns and walks swiftly out of my reach and around the privacy screen. I step out, too, just in time to see her snatch up her clutch from the table.

"You're wrong. About me having nothing to lose," I say. "I could lose you."

She glances up at me over her shoulder and says, "You'd have to have me first."

Before I can respond, she strides to the door, jerks it open, and is gone.

CHAPTER 30



HENDRIX

This apartment has always been my haven, a place I can count on to retreat from the world when things get hard. But there's no escaping the voice in my head calling me a fool. And no escaping the memory of last night in New York. The ghost of Maverick's touch haunts me everywhere—kisses along my shoulders and tender brushes of his lips at the curve of my neck. His fingers threaded with mine while he made a mess of our kiss. Sloppy, greedy feasting; eating each other like a buffet.

As vivid as the memories of Maverick's lovemaking are, they don't eclipse the guilt I woke up with this morning.

Fucking a friend's ex on her fortieth birthday? At her party?

But… are we really friends… per se? More like business associates. Acquaintances, even.

Didn't she call you a friend last night? Are you saying that to rationalize your reckless, thot-ish actions in that coatroom?

I hate my inner voice sometimes. She's such a bitch. Don't let me get away with nothing.

But it *is* true that Zere and I are primarily business associates. It *is* true that I haven't known her *that* long. And I have no doubt that Maverick was right and Zere and Charles probably screwed till the break of dawn.

Meanwhile, I'm here alone when there's a magnificent, once-in-a-lifetime specimen of a man who wants me. A stunning billionaire motherfucker who donates millions to HBCUs, invests in Black businesses, and surfs.

Surfboard in my Beyoncé voice.

I flop back onto my bed and stare up at the ceiling. I caught an earlier flight out of New York. I hadn't told Maverick where I was staying, but I didn't think that information was beyond his reach. I didn't put it past him to chase me down, so I got out of the city on the first thing smoking back to the A.

I roll onto my side and tug the waist of my silk pajama shorts down to expose the curve of my hip. Maverick left souvenirs, faint bruises where he held me so hard when he fucked me. I caress one smudge on my skin and moan, pulling my knees up to my chest.

I didn't even tell Soledad and Yasmen I'm home a little early or that Mav and I smashed. They're my best friends, but they will have questions, and of course advice—solicited and unsolicited. I just want a little time to process what happened.

What I did.

Is this a secret I'll keep from my business partner forever? That I fucked her ex once?

Once? that inner bitch taunts. *Like you wouldn't do it again.*

"Shut uuuuuuup," I groan and squeeze my eyes closed tight.

My cell buzzes on the bed beside me with a call, and I glance over to see it's the front desk downstairs.

"Yes, hello?" I sit up and push my hair back from my face. That wig is hanging in my closet and I washed my hair, which, after about fifty eleven products, blossomed into a big ol' Afro.

"Delivery, Ms. Barry."

"What is it?" I sigh and roll off the bed to check my reflection in the large mirror hanging on the wall. Pink silk lounge shorts and fuzzy slippers. I'm cocoa buttered and not planning to leave this place all day.

"Flowers again."

"How many?" I ask, making my way down the steps and studying the empty surfaces in the living room and kitchen that were filled with Maverick's flowers not long ago.

"Just one dozen this time, it seems."

"Okay. Send them up."

I hate that my heart is beating triple time at the thought that Maverick is still pursuing me, even though I told him to stop. Am I becoming that girl? The one who is coy with her refusal? Who says one thing and means another? Wants another?

I open the door to confront a bouquet of champagne roses so large it eclipses the delivery man.

“Thank you,” I say. “I’ll take them.”

He moves the flowers obscuring his face aside. Maverick staring back at me nearly pulls my heart through my chest. My shoulders go taut, and I steel myself against the way I melt a little inside at just the sight of him. Not speaking, I turn and head back into the loft.

“These are for you,” he says, placing the roses on my coffee table.

“I figured.” I sit on the couch and notice the bottle in his hands. “And what it that for?”

“Also for you.” He sets the bottle down beside the vase of roses. “One of my favorites. Macallan Anniversary Malt, 1928.”

My brows lift. I’m not an expert, but I do recognize it’s a very valuable bottle of whiskey.

“Trying to buy my affection?” I ask.

“I already have your affection.” He sits so close the rough denim of his jeans is mildly abrasive against my bare thigh. “We’re friends, right?”

“That was before we fucked.”

“Friends don’t fuck?”

I blow out a disbelieving breath. “You want to be my friend?”

“Always.” He looks at me unblinkingly, unsmilingly for a few seconds. “You bring a goddess offerings. The whiskey is a gift, an expression of worship.”

I roll my eyes. “If you’re saying that I’m a—”

“I am saying that.” His eyes roam the length of my body and I force myself not to squirm. “If you give me the chance, I’ll make you feel like the goddess I see you as.”

My belly is a bowlful of Jell-O. The longer I sit beside him, smell him, feel the heat of him pressed so close and see the tenderness in his eyes, the more my convictions wobble.

“What exactly do you want?” I ask. “A repeat of last night? You came here to have sex again? Because I’m in my right mind now and I won’t slip and fuck you in a closet.”

“I want you in your right mind.” His mouth kicks up into a one-sided grin. “So we can negotiate.”

“Negotiate?”

“I’m very good at it.”

“So am I.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“What exactly are we negotiating?”

“Our future.”

Those words are a one-two punch to my throat. The thought steals my breath for a second.

“We don’t have one,” I say, toying with the silk band on my pajama bottoms. “Not together. I don’t want what you want. We don’t want the same things.”

“Our encounter in the coatroom last night begs to differ. I think we both got what we wanted. You got it twice, if I counted correctly.”

Most women would probably at least wince or flinch or blush at the reminder of their freakishness, but I force myself to present an unwavering stare, unmoved and unashamed.

“You’ve wasted a trip, Mav. We had sex once. So what? Making me come is not an accomplishment. Plenty of people have.”

He frowns. “I don’t care how many people you’ve slept with, Hendrix. You’re not going to change my mind throwing that in my face. I said I’m here to negotiate our future, not to litigate your past. Or mine, for that matter.”

I hate him for being exactly the kind of man I would choose.

“I don’t have to ask if you care about me,” Maverick goes on. “I know you do. We’ve become friends, but I’ve always wanted you. If the situation with Zere weren’t a factor, I would have pursued you from the beginning.”

“Get to the point so you can go.” I try to sound testy, but the indulgent smile he sends me says I’m not doing a very good job of it.

“I’m not going. That’s the first thing you should know,” he says. “I want to build something lasting with you.”

His declaration steals my breath and robs me of speech, leaving me to stare at him a in lengthening silence.

“Let me ask you something,” he finally says. “When you’ve accomplished all your goals, have your TV show, got your unicorn business—whatever’s on your list—after you’ve gotten all of that, what then?”

I frown and grit my teeth. “Why does there have to be anything else?”

“Because there has to be more to life than the things we do, Hendrix.”

“I’m creating a legacy. I’m serving my community. I’m

achieving…"

Before I can block it, Soledad's voice echoes back to me. Actually my own words to her echo back to me.

There are parts of you that want to be held, want to be needed and loved. That is just as emotionally valid as the parts of you that crave independence.

"I'm chasing my dreams," I finish with as much strength as I can muster.

"I'm chasing *you*."

My eyes snap to his and neither of us look away.

"I *am* a chaser, Hendrix. I go after things. You won't find a man more ambitious than me, but I've learned that it's never enough," he says, his stare burning with belief, blazing with conviction. "You can't earn enough. You can't achieve enough. Ambition for things and accolades is a bottomless pit. It's all you can eat, but you never get full."

He takes my hands between his and looks into my eyes—it *feels* like he looks into my soul. "My life won't be measured just in what I did, but who I did it with. Who I chose to be in friendship with. In relationship with. I think that's where real contentment is found, and I think I could find it with you."

His words are a direct hit to my resistance, and I pull away from his touch, though my whole body begs me to lean into it.

"You know I want to get into television," I tell him, my voice carrying a note of desperation. "You're asking me to jeopardize my chance and Chapel's chance to get this show made for you?"

"No, I'm saying I don't believe it would jeopardize your chances, but if Zere trips, we find another way. And it wouldn't be for me. It would be for us."

"Oh, but *us* is a trick men play on trusting women." I stand and whirl on him, and the smell of roses, sweet mere moments ago, is suddenly cloying, choking. "When the rubber meets the road, it's *him*, not *them*. *You*, not *us*."

"I can't blame you for feeling that way, for assuming that's how I would be because most men are. Most women *do* sacrifice disproportionately in their relationships with men. We have to guard against that. I'll look after you."

"I don't need you to buy me a career. I have one." I make my point with a hand slicing through the air. "I have my own money and can take care of myself."

“I’d like for us to take care of each other. If we’re together, we’re together. We help each other. We have each other’s backs. Don’t let the possibility that Zere wouldn’t approve keep us from even trying.”

“But I—”

“You don’t want a man holding your happiness hostage, putting his needs over yours, but isn’t that what Zere would be doing if she tried to stop you from seeing me if that’s what you want?”

He stands, reaches for me, cups my face; the look he gives me somehow searching and knowing at the same time.

“Is that what you want, Hen? Am *I* what you want? Because I want you and the only thing that will stop me from having you… is you. Not Zere or anyone else.”

“You said you’re here to negotiate our future.” I struggle to swallow whatever is rising in my throat. I suspect it might be hope. “What are you offering and what do you need? Where’s your list of demands?”

“I don’t have a list. I have one thing.”

“One thing?” I frown. “What is it?”

“Let’s be good to each other.”

“That’s it?” I ask, incredulity stretching my expression.

“That’s everything because that means I’m good to you and you’re good to me. Being good to you means wanting what’s best for you. If there is an upper hand, baby, I don’t want it. I know I’m asking you to take a big risk, but all I can do is promise that I’ll never try to hurt you and I’ll do everything to protect you. I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you don’t regret choosing me and I’ll protect your dreams as fiercely as I chase my own.”

He says it like a vow, not like for a wedding, but sincerely. Like he means it. Like he understands what’s at stake. No man in the last two decades has tempted me to do this. Not that I haven’t dated and even had a few committed relationships over the years, but I always walked away before it felt like this. Hell, it’s *never* felt like this.

I revisit that rare loneliness at game night. The sense of everyone paired off and belonging somewhere and *to* someone. Am I fine on my own? I really am. I mostly always have been.

But would I like to share this amazing life I’ve created for myself with someone else? Someone truly worthy of my trust?

Damn right I would.

I’ve always known there is power in making your own way, but

maybe when you find the right person, there is joy in sharing it. *This man* is right.

"Okay."

After so much wrestling and denying and running, my word is an easy capitulation. It's hard-won, though, this realization that I don't want to defer my chance at joy for ambition, that my independence doesn't have to mean isolation.

"Okay?" Surprise streaks across his face. "Did you say okay?"

"After all that, I agree and you don't believe me?" I laugh and sit back down on the couch, tugging him to sit beside me.

"I believe you, but what made you change your mind? Or rather what made you choose me?"

"I've been wary of commitment because I've always seen women put their partners' desires and goals before their own." I shrug. "I even saw it with my own parents in some ways. I saw it with friends from college who had ambitions, but lost sight of that when they married. They compromised once they had a husband and a family."

"Is that why you don't want kids?"

"No, I don't want kids because I don't want kids." I huff a laugh. "Amazing how no one ever believes it's as simple as that. The closest thing I'll come to a maternal instinct is maybe a dog someday."

"That would be a lucky dog." He smiles. "You *should* do what feels right to you. I'm just glad that this—us—feels right to you."

"It's starting to." I sigh. "Maybe I was so determined not to miss out on the opportunity of a career goal, that I was willing to compromise a personal one."

He takes my hand and pulls me to straddle his lap, one leg on either side of his. I rest my elbows on his solid chest and smile down at him.

"I feel like this conversation is about to get a lot less productive." I chuckle, caressing his nape.

"Focus." He grins up at me, but places both hands on my ass. "And what is that personal goal?"

The humor dims and I settle onto his lap, giving his question serious consideration.

"I haven't been in a relationship in a really long time," I say, which doesn't exactly answer his question yet. "And I think I've been avoiding it to protect my dreams. I've never wanted to look

back on my life and not have accomplished the things I wanted to do because I had to compromise for someone else's sake. Maybe that sounds selfish—"

"Only because you're a woman. Men do it all the time and we don't think twice about it. Our wives stay home, keep our kids, hold down the house, and we're not considered selfish. It's expected."

"Yes, and I *expect* something different from and for myself. I know the kind of woman I want to be and the kind of life I want and I'm not willing to forfeit it to have a man. His happiness for my misery is not an even trade."

"I agree."

"Some of the best advice my mother ever gave me was to take my time getting married."

"Um, didn't you tell me your parents met in the eighth grade?" He grins, brows lifted.

"And married by nineteen, yeah." I blow out a laugh. "Not exactly taking her own advice, huh? She didn't regret the sacrifices she made, though. My parents had a once-in-a-lifetime love, but she *knows* me. She recognized that I needed more than that. That if I made the same decisions she did, I would eventually regret and resent them. She urged me to take my twenties to figure out who I was and what I would and wouldn't settle for."

"And your thirties?"

"Well, once I figured out what I wanted and needed, I realized how few truly eligible men there were. I mean eligible for *me*. In my thirties I learned to be happy with myself and the life I was building. I learned to be whole."

"And now?"

"Now I'm on the cusp of everything I've been working toward in my career, and I realize that acknowledging those parts of me that want care and companionship doesn't make me less whole. It doesn't mean I'm not happy, but that this is something *else* that can make me happy."

"Thank you for trusting me, Gorgeous." He leans up and whispers against my lips. "You won't regret it."

I can't resist kissing him, and I take his bottom lip between mine, sucking and tugging, groaning when he returns the favor even more aggressively. Biting down and licking at the sting.

"I knew we needed to talk." He tips my chin up and kisses the curve of my jawline, the slope of my neck. "But I've barely been

able to focus on anything except how good it felt to be inside you last night. I want that again, Hen."

I nod, leaning back on his lap, my fingers shaking and clumsy on the buttons of my pajama top. My breasts spill free and he's on me like lightning, his mouth frantic and desperate and starving as he licks and sucks and laves. His dick is so hard pressing into my heat, and I need to *feel* him now. I wiggle to get the shorts and my underwear down and off my legs. Naked, I resettle on his lap and reach for his zipper.

"Hey." He covers my hand. "Let's go slow this time. Take me to bed, Hen."

I bring him in for a kiss, a slow, sensual dance of lips and teeth and tongues. When I've waited one more second, I break the kiss and stand, completely naked. I extend my hand and pull him from the couch. He scoops up the bottle of whiskey and then grabs my hand. Everything is slowed down. Even our journey up the stairs is punctuated with stops every few steps; pauses for him to kiss my shoulders and caress my arms, test the weight of my breasts in his big, gentle hands. By the time we reach the bedroom, my legs are shaking and my heart feels like someone rang a gong in my chest.

With Maverick trailing me, he has an unrestricted view of my bare ass, all my cellulite and any extra flesh on my back. I search for self-consciousness, but can't make room for it, not with him. Maverick steps close behind me and walks us to the bed, my fingers clutched in one of his hands and the bottle in the other.

"If I make a mess," he says, greed in the look that sweeps over my body, "I promise to clean it up."

"A mess?" I ask. "What do you mean? I—"

"This," he says, holding up the bottle of Macallan, "is a two-hundred-thousand-dollar bottle of whiskey."

My jaw falls open. That's more than my car. It's more than my last commission. It's a lot of damn money.

"And you want to get me drunk first?" My laugh is weak as I try to play off my shock.

"No." He doesn't smile or laugh. "I want to pour it as an offering before I worship you."

I gasp as he lifts the bottle and pours chilled liquid down my body. It sluices over my breasts, down my belly and between my legs. Hands free, he leans to take one dripping nipple in his mouth. He greedily bobs his head between the right and left breast, sucking

and licking and laving. Delving into my cleavage to sop the drops up before they dry. I'm standing, writhing beneath the heat of his mouth cleaning away all traces of the whiskey. Unable to bear it one more second, I grab his head and kiss him. We devour each other, and the intoxicating effect of the kiss has nothing to do with the whiskey.

It's us.

He nudges me toward the bed and lays me out, staring down for a few seconds before sinking to the floor between my knees. He presses my legs apart and leans forward and fixes his eyes there.

I tip my head back and laugh up at the ceiling. "Mav, don't just stare at it."

"But it's so pretty."

My breath catches and the muscles in my stomach clench, my whole body on high alert preparing to be touched and taken by him.

"I'm naked and you're still fully clothed."

"And that's a problem?" His teasing grin between my knees makes my insides somersault.

"Do I get to see as much of you as you get to see of me?"

"You want to see me?" His brows lift and one corner of his sinfully full lips quirk.

"Show me the goods, Bell."

With his eyes fixed on mine, he slowly undoes each button on the fine cotton of his collared shirt, revealing ridges of muscle in his torso and abs beneath. It's as arresting a sight as when I saw him on Instagram in his wetsuit.

"You surf," I say before I think to *not* say that.

His hand pauses on his belt. He tilts his head and studies me.

"I do." He resumes undoing the belt, unbuttoning his pants, letting them drop to the floor. "I can teach you if you want."

"I don't think so," I say absently, almost forgetting what we're talking about when I see his erection so big and doing its damnedest to poke a hole in his boxers. I sit up and swat his hands away from his hips. I push the boxers down and gasp at my first sight of his dick. It's right there, on level with my lips. How can I not lean forward and take him into my mouth? He makes this sound that's something between a curse and a moan, and I'm throbbing between my legs. He steps closer between my spread knees and pushes his length deeper into my mouth. The tip of my tongue finds

his slit, already wet and salty.

"Shit." He cups my face, caressing my jaw as I lick and suck him.

I palm his balls and take him deeper. His indrawn breath and tightening hands on my head tell me he likes it.

"I want to fuck your mouth," he says, his voice low and strained.

I nod my consent and he pushes in, snaps his hips forward again and again and again, the motion growing more frenetic. He hits the back of my throat and I choke, but don't release him. He slows, gently opening my mouth with his thumb, caressing my wet, swollen lips.

"I'll come if I don't stop," he pants. "And it feels like I'll die if I don't get inside you."

It feels that way for me, too. My legs spread wider at the promise of him claiming me that way.

"There's condoms and lube in the nightstand," I tell him, nodding to the side of the bed. To his credit, Maverick doesn't seem thrown at all by the ample supply of condoms in the top drawer, or by the fleet of vibrators he pushes aside to get to my lube. He slides the condom on and rubs lube all over himself.

And it makes me want him more.

It must be on my face because he pauses when he's positioned over me and says, "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Nothing, just… most guys complain about me asking for lube because they think it means they didn't get me wet enough or some shit."

"The point is for us to both enjoy it, right?" He caresses my leg from knee to hip, and a shudder moves through me like he touched a nerve, not just bare skin. "So you tell me what you want and I'll do it."

I reach up to stroke the dark slash of his brow through golden-brown skin.

"I want you to make love to me."

He pushes in.

He used the word "worship," and that's exactly how it feels when he comes inside, like my body is a tabernacle and he's awed by the privilege of entering. Pleasure explodes from a hidden part of me no one else has ever discovered. With his patience and care, Maverick tunnels through my defenses and excuses, clearing a

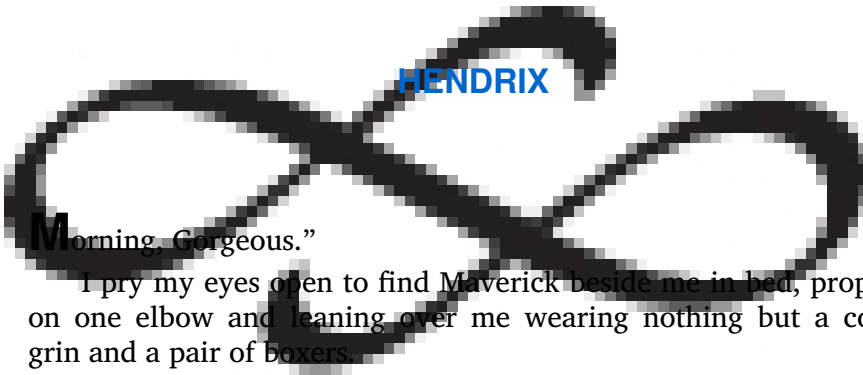
passageway to my heart with every kiss and each touch. I'm not saying it's love. It's too soon for that, but it's… something I didn't think existed.

The rhythm of his breathing roughens the longer he fucks me. The erratic non-pattern of pants and moans every touch draws from me. He grabs my throat and holds my eyes, pounding into me. The bed rocks, knocking my nightstand, and the lamp rattles from the force of it. I swear the walls tremble when I come. And the boundary I've always maintained with every other lover begins to fissure, webbing and widening until it cracks. Until it collapses, surrenders to the tenderness in his eyes and the urgency of his hands.

It falls.

And, dammit to hell, so do I.

CHAPTER 31



HENDRIX

Morning, Gorgeous.”

I pry my eyes open to find Maverick beside me in bed, propped on one elbow and leaning over me wearing nothing but a cocky grin and a pair of boxers.

I peruse the sculpted wonder of this man’s body. He’s sun-bronzed brown, corded with muscle, striped with sinew, dusted with just the right amount of hair in the places I like, and little to none in the places I don’t. I’ve never obsessed over a man’s chest, but his pecs have me kind of riveted.

“I feel very objectified right now.” Maverick laughs. “Don’t mind me trying to hold an actual conversation while you ogle me from head to toe.”

I force my eyes above his neck to meet his amused stare.

“I was just thinking it’s a shame I didn’t get to fully explore all this,” I say, gesturing up and down his long body. “Since last night was the last time we’ll ever have sex.”

His smile drops and his brows jerk together.

“What the hell, Hen? If you’re having regrets, we can talk about __”

“Oh, my God! Your face! I’m joking.” Laughing, I drag myself up to rest my shoulders against the headboard, tugging the sheets up over my breasts. “But I get it. My pussy has that effect on people.”

He leans forward to cup my jaw. “I don’t want to hear about the effect you have on anyone but me.”

I lift my brows and let out a throaty chuckle. “So this is

happening again *and* it's exclusive?"

He pulls himself up to sit beside me, his shoulders against the headboard and pressed into mine. He threads our fingers together to rest on the sheet in my lap. He kisses my knuckle, eyes fixed on mine.

"I guess I assumed… if you felt any of what I did last night… Shit." He runs a hand over the back of his neck, the uncertainty on his face out of step with his usual self-assurance. "I'm not doing a good job of this, and you're right. I can't assume anything, so I'm saying to you very clearly I want to make love to you as many times as humanly possible. I only want to do it with you and I would appreciate it if you would consider only doing it with me."

My heart melts around the edges. This supremely confident man, who has achieved more in forty years than most will in a lifetime, humbling himself this way humbles *me*.

And that is no mean feat.

"I'd like that, too. Both of those things, but," I say, holding up a hand before we skip past some important steps, "we have to tell Zere."

We stare at each other and the implications of what we've done suck some of the air from the room.

"Do you want me to talk to her?" he asks. "Do you want to? Should we do it together?"

"Not together. I think I should talk to her alone first, but let me think about it some."

He nods, leans in, and drops a kiss on my lips. Splaying one big hand over my throat, he moves to deepen the kiss, slipping his tongue into my mouth. He tastes minty. I do not.

I pull back and ask, "You found the spare toothbrush?"

"Yup."

When I stretch the sheet falls around my waist, and he's looking at my breasts like they're drenched in syrup and butter. "Now who's ogling?"

"Guilty." His voice is husky. "When can we fuck again?"

I guffaw at his blunt question. "Wow. Just put it out there, huh?"

He crawls over me, settling between my legs. He presses into me and my breath whooshes out, the pleasure stealing me even with the sheet between us. His hands crawl under my hips and he drops his mouth to one breast, sucking and licking in rhythm with

gentle squeezes of my ass.

"Food," I moan, pulling his head up because two more seconds of this and we'll be going at it again. "Somebody crashed my Soft Girl Sunday and I never got to eat."

"I should feel bad, but I don't." His smile is tender and affectionate. "I saw eggs and stuff."

"You been up snooping around my place?"

"I'm an early riser. I've been up for like two hours."

"A morning person?" I huddle back into my pillow and tug the sheet over my head. "This isn't gonna work."

"Oh, yes it is." He snatches the sheet back down. "Can I make you breakfast?"

"Yes, please." I can't hold back the grin that breaks through the last shreds of my reserve. "And thank you."

I haven't felt like this since maybe tenth grade. Kind of giddy. Like everything is fresh and new and blossoming. I became jaded with men early on. Cheating on me in high school and college. Leaving when it became clear I refused to compromise my desires for their own. They showed me over and over again that most of them couldn't be trusted or relied on, and many weren't secure enough in their own shit to deal with how secure I am in mine. It's not that I'm naive again, but that I feel safe enough with someone to *allow* myself these feelings. To allow myself to hope.

"I'm gonna shower," I tell him. "While you serve me."

He gives me a wry look. "You're pushing it."

"Am I?" I ask coyly.

His smile fades to a soft affection. "No."

He sits on the edge of the bed and pulls me down onto his lap, caressing my hip through the decadent silk of the sheet.

"Can I ask you something and you promise not to freak out on me?" He dusts kisses along my jaw and down my neck.

"Do I need to focus to answer this question, because that's not helping."

He chuckles and pulls back, but keeps me in place. "When is your aunt's surgery?"

I frown, slightly thrown by the change in conversation. It's been easy to forget the outside world existed for a few hours, but my responsibilities come rushing back.

"In two weeks. I'll move in with them a little before the surgery to get settled and get a sense of their routine before Aunt G goes

in."

"And you'll be doing what until then?"

"Working." I shrug. "The usual."

"Could you work from anywhere? Or do you need to physically be in Atlanta?"

"Where do you physically want me to be?" I ask, an involuntary smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

"With me," he answers simply. "Spend a week with me at my place in Malibu. My dad has a house up the beach. You met him briefly, but I'd love for you to get to know him. And I can teach you how to surf."

"Surf?" I give a breezy laugh to cover up the fluttery feeling in the pit of my stomach. "Um… not sure about that. I didn't realize your father lived so close to you."

"He used to live in Vegas, but after my mom passed," he says, his expression shadowing, "he was in a really bad place. We both were, so I got him a house not too far away. A walk up the beach actually. We needed to be close, but also needed our own space. It seemed like a good solution."

I'm in a relationship with a man who buys his father an oceanside Malibu property "to have him close." *And* he wants me to get to know his dad. *And* he wants me to spend a week at his home. *And* he wants to teach me how to surf.

Wait.

I'm in a relationship.

"Just somewhere together before you're gone for six weeks," he says, interrupting my internal meltdown.

"All right."

"This," he says, waving a hand between us, "is very new. I want a little time before you have to lock in at your mom's. I know that's going to carry some stress. I'd love for you to have some time to relax before that happens."

He cups my face and drops a kiss to my lips. "Before you have to take care of her, let me take care of you a little."

This is what most women dream of. A handsome billionaire to sweep them off their feet and whisk them away. I'm equal parts thrilled… and slightly terrified. I went from not even sure I'd give him a real chance last night to us spending the next week together? This is fast. Not just our plans, but what this feels like. How solid and anchored things seem between us already. My heart pulls me

forward, racing ahead with a recklessness that kind of scares me. My head says slow things down.

Manage expectations. Measure the risk. Weigh the consequences of giving him so much so fast.

"Can I think about it?" I ask.

He smooths over his disappointment quickly, but not before I catch it in the way he hoods his eyes and tightens his mouth. "Of course. I just thought if we—"

"It's a good thought," I rush to say. "But I want to make sure it's the right thing to do right now. For me. Is that okay?"

His expression softens with what I hope is understanding. "Yeah. I don't mean to rush you. We found each other at a weird time. I was barely out of my relationship with Zere when we met."

"Yeah."

"I know in some ways it feels like bad timing, but it's the best." He lifts my chin with one finger so our eyes meet. "I can't imagine meeting you when I was still with her. Now *that* would have been messy because I've felt drawn to you from the moment we met. I would not have cheated on Zee, but I don't think I could have ignored what's between us."

I've never been one to cheat, to steal another woman's partner, but the temptation would have been so strong. I'm glad we weren't tested that way. The test that still lies ahead of us is bad enough.

"You think about it." He stands. "And I'll go get breakfast started."

He heads downstairs, and for a few seconds after he leaves, I just sit there. Thinking of going to his house for a week, I'm so conflicted.

"What should I do?" I ask the unhelpful, empty room.

I'm supposed to be showering, but I grab my phone from the nightstand and fire off a text.

Me: Hey, bitches. I need some advice.

Soledad: This is my specialty.

Yasmen: Sol, you don't even know what she needs yet! LOL! What's up, Hen? And how was the party?

Me: Can we video chat?

Soledad: Oh, this is gonna be good!

Yasmen: I have 15 minutes before I need to go. We have this Black business brunch thing.

Me: We'll be quick.

As soon as the three of us are on, I dive in.

"Hey," I say. "Like I said, I need your advice."

"Aren't you still in New York?" Soledad asks.

"No, I'm home." I make my eyes as wide as they've ever been in my life. "And Maverick is here. At my place."

"Um… Maverick Bell?" Yasmen's brows furrow. "Did I miss something?"

"Ohhhh, you actually did," Soledad says. "I was at Hen's helping her choose a dress for the party and we decided maybe she should give Maverick a chance since he came over to her house and they dry-humped on the couch."

"What?" Yasmen's eyes saucer on-screen. "And I'm just now hearing about this?"

"Okay, sorry," I say. "There's been a lot going on. Maverick was in town and expressed a desire to… pursue something."

"And then came the humping," Soledad inserts helpfully.

"Sol!" Yasmen and I laughingly say in unison.

"Sorry." She has the decency to look contrite, though she's fighting a smile.

"Where does Zere fit in this equation?" Yasmen asks.

"Did you see the post with her new boyfriend?" Sol demands. "Zere's moved on. So can Maverick."

"Okay, I saw that," Yasmen concedes. "I know Maverick is the total package, but it's still complicated. We *are* acknowledging that, right?"

"How *is* his package, by the way?" Sol asks with a mischievous grin. "Did you find out last night?"

"Sol! Oh, my God," Yasmen squeaks, but then pauses. "I mean… Did you?"

"Let's just say," I offer, tongue in my cheek, "I have no

complaints."

"*You* have no complaints?" Soledad practically screams. "Hen, you always have complaints. The guy's got ashy ankles, or he used the word 'conversating.'"

"Remember the one she wouldn't give a second date because he carried his own toothpicks?" Yasmen adds.

"Toothpicks!" I try to hold on to my straight face, but my lips twitch. "Now y'all know that's some serial killer behavior."

"I'm just saying it's always something with you," Yasmen continues. "So no complaints… Wow."

I chuckle and shrug. "I'm not saying Maverick is perfect, but he feels…"

Perfect for me.

I don't say it, but maybe something on my face does because both of their smiles dissolve. Never in the time they've known me have I asked for this kind of advice. I've never needed it. Wasn't even tempted to go this far with anyone. They both sought counsel on love, and I never held back the best advice I could offer. Now I need them to do the same for me.

"He wants us to spend the next week together at his house in Malibu," I say. "Before I have to go to my mom's when Aunt Geneva has her surgery."

Both of their jaws unhinge and fall open.

"I know." I chew my thumbnail. "It's a lot and it's fast."

"Does it feel too fast?" Yasmen asks. "You have always had the best gut instincts of us all, Hen. You know yourself. What does your gut say?"

I'm almost afraid to voice what I feel at a molecular level is the right thing for me to do. Not for Zere. Not for Chapel. Not for my business. For *me*. Maverick feels right for me and it is absolutely terrifying.

"Go," I whisper. "My gut says go."

"Then you go," Soledad says, "but mitigate the fallout. You gotta talk to Zere before it goes any further."

"I know." I huff out a sigh and search their faces. "Did I break girl code?"

"The technicalities of whether or not you broke some unspoken code won't matter if Zere is hurt or angry," Yasmen says, sympathy in her expression. "You have to be prepared for the fact that she may see this as a betrayal, even though *technically* it's not. It won't

matter if you win on a technicality if she no longer feels she can work with you because you're dating her ex-boyfriend."

Dating? Shit. I'm 'bout to be dating?

"Are you prepared for that?" Yasmen presses.

Am I?

"And is he worth it?" Soledad asks.

I lick suddenly dry lips. The implications don't just affect me, but Chapel, too. That's another conversation I'll need to have if Zere decides to dissolve our business partnership.

"Oh, hi!" Soledad squeals, her wide eyes trained over my shoulder.

I whip around so fast I almost fall off my bed.

"Whoa," Maverick says, catching my elbow and carefully righting me. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I say, a little breathless. "I didn't hear you come in. We… well, we—"

"I'm Yasmen," she cuts in, beaming on-screen. "Nice to meet you, Maverick."

"I've heard a lot about you." He smiles easily as if he's not bare-chested and wearing only briefs. Fortunately the phone's camera is aimed *up*. "And you must be Soledad."

"I am," she says, her grin stretching from one corner of her face to the other. "It's really nice to meet you."

"I didn't mean to interrupt," he says, resting his palm with casual possessiveness at my nape. "Food's ready."

"Okay. I'll be down."

"Nice to meet you both," he says, shifting his gaze back to the screen. "Hope to see you in person soon."

He walks out and we wait a collective beat before they both release whisper-screams.

"Gurhhhhllllll." Yasmen fans her face. "We gotta work this out. You waited all this time and Father God sent you *that*? Sis, you *deserve*."

"You do, Hen." Soledad blinks rapidly.

"Sol, are you…" I lean closer and take in the light skin flush of her cheeks and the way her nose is reddening. "Are you 'bout to cry?"

"I'm just so happy for you," Soledad sniffs. "You've waited for someone who could truly be your match, and I feel like he could be, Hen."

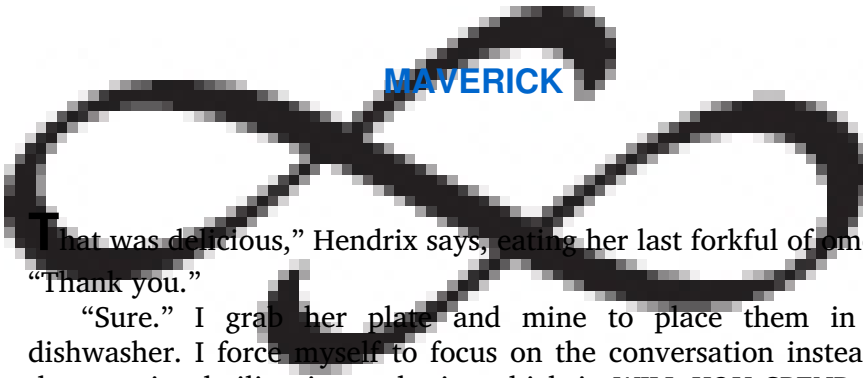
“Lawd! Y’all some hussies. Were you this confident before you saw how fine he is half naked?” I ask dryly.

“My confidence definitely shot through the roof at that point,” Yasmen says, cackling. “When a man like that wants you, and you want him, you better have a damn good reason to not go for it.”

I search my heart, my mind, my gut. All the places that have unfailingly steered my decisions over the years. Do I have a good enough reason not to pursue Maverick Bell?

I don’t think I do.

CHAPTER 32



MAVERICK

"That was delicious," Hendrix says, eating her last forkful of omelet. "Thank you."

"Sure." I grab her plate and mine to place them in the dishwasher. I force myself to focus on the conversation instead of the question boiling in my brain, which is *WILL YOU SPEND THE WEEK WITH ME?*

"It was nice meeting your friends," I say instead. "At least on-screen."

"They're the best." She sends me a wry, amused glance. "Let's just say they're impressed with you."

"Oh, word?" I ask, allowing a one-sided tilt of a grin.

"Yeah. Black surfer boy may be our new kink."

"What are your old ones?"

She leans forward to suck my earlobe into her mouth, wet and hot. Her hand wanders between us to clasp my dick in a just-right grip. My knees actually go a little weak.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she chuckles huskily into my ear.

I gulp and breathe out, "I want to know everything about you, Hendrix."

The words ring with such truth and carry such weight that she must hear, must *feel* it, too. She pulls away, the laughter dying in her eyes and stares at me like I've startled her. Hell, I startled myself. I don't know how Hendrix Barry has come to feel this vital to me, but I want her in my life. There is so much we still have to learn about each other, but deep down, past my intellect, past my gut instincts, to where knowledge is primordial, that's where I know

Hendrix is supposed to be in my life. That level of recognition isn't about how long you've known a person. It doesn't matter that it's complicated or fast. That place that is buried deep below what is civilized or rational calls out for *her*; demands that I do whatever it takes to keep her.

She clears her throat and tightens the belt of the robe around her waist.

"I should probably get dressed," she says, walking to the other end of the counter. Does she think putting physical distance between us will lessen the strength of desire, the need that throbs in the air when we're together?

"Have you thought any more about my invitation?" I pose the question I've wanted to ask since she sat down to eat. I made it through breakfast without asking, for which I should be awarded a medal. I want us to have time together. Last night felt tectonic. Like the earth shifted beneath our feet. I want to give it time to settle, time for *us* to settle into *being* an us.

"I have thought about it." Hendrix leans forward to rest her elbows on the kitchen counter. "And I think I can make it work, but there are some conditions."

"Such as?"

"I need to get my hair braided. I already had an appointment scheduled for tomorrow. Can we leave Atlanta tomorrow?"

I don't point out that I'll be chartering a plane, so yes, we can leave whenever we want to. I nod.

"And I want to keep a low profile. I just don't want any media speculation, especially since we don't know how Zere will react to all of this."

"We won't be bothered at my place. I have a chef who can prepare all our meals. There's almost no one on my stretch of beach. We could practically walk around naked and be fine," I say, up-and-downing my brows suggestively.

"Oh, that's my other condition." She glances down at her hands resting on the counter, her expression going grave. "Maybe we jumped the gun last night. I want to get this right. We need to clear our minds and make sure it's not just physical attraction driving this. I think we should abstain this week."

My heart sinks… to my dick, but I keep my face impassive and nod. If that's what she needs, I can do that, but it will hurt.

"Psych!" Hendrix yells, and points at me. "We gon' be fucking!

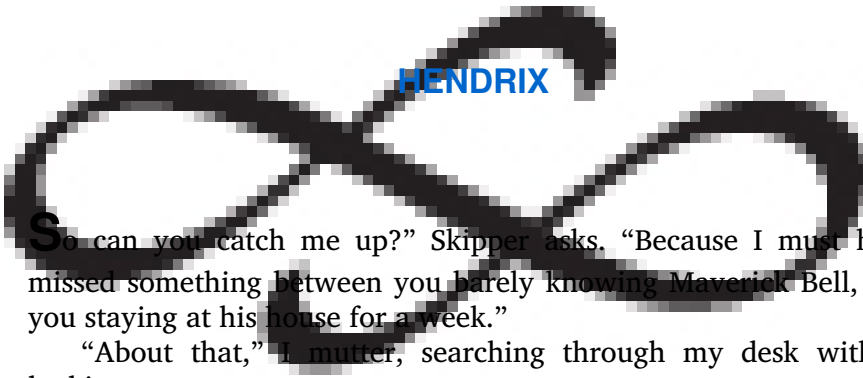
Second time today I got you. To be Mr. Vegas, you have no poker face."

It takes a moment to sink in, but as soon as I grasp how she played me… again… I stride down the counter to grab her and give her a playful shake. She loops her arms around my neck and I laugh, leaning into the scented curve of her neck.

"You know I'd be fine if you didn't want to," I tell her, pulling back to search her face. "Like if this is going too fast at any point, or if you don't like anything that's happening, tell me."

"I will." She brushes her thumb over my eyebrow and her bold features soften. "But right now, we're doing okay."

CHAPTER 33



HENDRIX

"So can you catch me up?" Skipper asks. "Because I must have missed something between you barely knowing Maverick Bell, and you staying at his house for a week."

"About that," I mutter, searching through my desk without looking up.

"You're dating Maverick Bell, Hendrix?"

The word "dating" makes me pause my search. I still can't quite wrap my mind around that concept, but I don't know what else to call it. We're together and don't plan to stop, so I guess that's dating.

"Well, yeah." I resume rifling through my desk drawer. "I had a charger. One of those little ones and now I can't… Ugh."

"And you'll be away from the office for the next week?"

I glance up from my hunt. "But I'll be working the whole time."

"Isn't this all happening a little fast? And your braids look great, by the way."

"Thanks. That African braider off Clairmont," I say, pulling my fresh knotless braids over one shoulder. "And are you seriously asking me if this is fast after you smashed Bolt within five minutes of meeting him?"

She lifts her chin, defiance in her stare. "That was a mistake and won't be happening again, but we're not talking about me. We're talking about you. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Believe me, I've spent a lot of time thinking this through, weighing the possible consequences." I sit back in my seat and give

her my full attention. “I want this and I’m going to let myself have it. To have him. I’m not saying it’s forever, but it doesn’t have to be. It’s what I want right now.”

“Have you told Zere? Chapel?”

“No, I’ll call them as soon as I find that charger.”

Skipper walks around to my side of the desk, opens the bottom drawer, shoves aside a few papers, and pulls out the charger.

“Ta-dah.” She tosses it onto my desk. “Guess you can call now.”

There was some part of me that was stalling, delaying the conversation I know I need to have with Zere. How that call goes determines what I’ll need to tell Chapel. There was a time not too long ago when I would never have put business at risk for a romantic relationship. I still can’t say I’m one hundred percent sure I won’t have any regrets, but never knowing what Maverick and I could have been won’t be one of them.

“Here you go,” Skipper says, handing me my phone from the edge of my desk. “I believe you needed this.”

“You don’t have as much job security as you think,” I mumble, only half joking. “Close the door behind you, sassy tail.”

Skipper pauses to do a little shimmy, but then closes the door.

I sigh, plug in the charger, and send the text I’ve been dreading.

Me: Hey, Zere! You got a sec?

For a few moments there’s no activity, but then reply bubbles appear.

Zere: Hey! Yeah. Call?

Me: Calling now.

“How are you?” she asks, answering after one ring.

“I’m good.” I make a conscious effort to relax my shoulders as if I’m telegraphing tension over the phone. “How’s forty treating you?”

“So far, so good. I’m in Paris so that’s always great.”

“Nice! Birthday trip?”

“Charles surprised me! Isn’t that marvelous?”

“That’s… that’s great, Zere.” I shift in my seat, searching for a

comfortable position when every part of this conversation will be uncomfortable. “You two looked happy at the party.”

“It’s been a rough few months, and he’s been there for me. Ya know?”

“Right. Well, he seems really nice.”

“Girl, Paris nice!” Zere chortles. “And if I so much as sneeze in the direction of anything, he buys it for me.”

“That’s great, Zere. You sound really happy.”

“I am. Anyway, you wanted to chat? About the show?”

“Not exactly.” I clear my throat, bolster my nerve and press on. “It’s personal, not the show.”

“Oh. Okay. What’s up?”

I should just say this and not draw it out. There’s no better setup than her being in Paris with another man.

“I wanted to let you know that Maverick and I are seeing each other.”

“Seeing each other where?”

I frown, unsure how to respond for a second. “Seeing each other… as in dating.”

The line goes so quiet I wonder if we’ve been disconnected.

“Zere? Are you still there? I said—”

“I heard you. I-I guess I just don’t understand.”

“Mav and I have become friends. As you know, he’s investing in our fund, so we started spending time together. Talking and—”

“And now you’re dating?”

“Out of respect for the relationship you had with him and the working relationship I have with you, I wanted to tell you personally.”

“We just broke up two months ago, Hendrix.”

“You released a statement two months ago,” I gently correct her. “But he says the two of you had decided to part ways before that.”

“Wow. Three months. Big difference.”

I’m not sure what to say to that. She is literally in Paris with another man and tripping over me and Mav? But I do understand she needs space to process this. I’ve known almost from the beginning that Maverick and I were attracted to each other. We danced around it for weeks to avoid this very conversation, so I’ve had time to become accustomed to it. She’s hearing it for the first time.

“I know you were together for a while,” I say. “And that—”

“And that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him? You know that? That I wanted to have his children? Oh, but you don’t want to be anyone’s mother, so match made in heaven, I guess.”

Now my patience is hanging by a string.

“You and Maverick wanted different things. You said that yourself, Zere.”

“No, I wanted one thing. One thing, Hendrix, that he would never give me and that was a child. If I’d been fine with no kids, we’d still be together. Have you thought about that?”

“No, but you obviously have,” I say before I think better of it. “I didn’t mean it that way. You and I work together, and I wanted the air to be clear between us.”

“So you call to tell me you’re dating the love of my life? The air is so clear, Hendrix.” She audibly draws in a huge gulp of air. “Ahhh! Now I can breathe.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” I say, keeping my voice even and quiet and calm. “This call was a courtesy because I want to preserve our working relationship.”

“I’m not sure we have one anymore.”

Her words punch me in the gut. I knew this was a possibility. My heart is not the only thing I’m risking pursuing this relationship with Maverick.

“I need some time to think,” Zere says. “I know I should be big about this. I do recognize that neither of you cheated. I get it with my head, but my… my heart.”

Her voice breaks and my stomach muscles clench at the sound of her crying.

“I understand if this means you don’t want to make a show with me anymore,” I force out. “I’m willing to step away altogether. Just please don’t give up on Chapel. We both know how much talent and potential she has.”

“Oh, I’m not giving up on Chapel, but I may be giving up on you,” she bites out, voice still watery, but harder. “Let me think about this and we can decide what to say to Chapel once I’ve had time to consider. Let’s wait to tell her.”

“That’s fair. Okay.”

“I thought this was your next step,” she says, her words curling at the edges with contempt. “I thought breaking into television was so important to you.”

“It is. If not with this show, there’ll be another one.”

“I think you feel so confident stepping away if it comes to that because you think Maverick can get you anything you want, and you’re probably right. I never used him that way, though.”

“And I have no intention of using him, either.” I make a fist on my desk, squeezing my frustration into a knot of calm inside my hand.

“Fucking a billion dollars makes you real bold, doesn’t it? A cash security blanket comes with spreading your legs for a rich man.”

“You would know.”

Her gasp on the other end tells me my aim was true. I hit my mark before I even realized I was throwing. This conversation is quickly slipping out of my control.

“Look, I think we should both take a beat,” I say. “I didn’t mean that, Zere, and I don’t think you actually believe I’m with Maverick for his money.”

“*With him.* You say it so easily like he’s always been yours. Wait. How long has this been going on?”

“We weren’t… the attraction was there, but we both fought it because we wanted to avoid this. We didn’t want to hurt you and knew how messy this could get.”

“Were you guys together at my birthday party and just fooled me? Just pretended not to be?”

“We decided after the party that we’d try to—”

“My birthday was two days ago,” she sniffs. “Did you fuck him on my birthday, Hendrix?”

Shit. What do I say to that? She rushes into the silence I’m not sure what to do with.

“You did that to me?”

“I didn’t do anything to you, Zere. I know it feels that way, but we haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You know what? I was gonna call girl code, but that’s for friends, and obviously we aren’t.”

The line goes quiet, dead when she hangs up without another word.

I toss the cell onto my desk and lean back in my seat.

“Dammit.” I rub my eyes. “That went great.”

I call Maverick.

“Hey, Gorgeous,” he says, the warm rumble of his voice

wrapping around me like a blanket. “You on your way home to me?”

I smile in spite of the shit show of a call with Zere.

“Yeah. I got my vacation hair and I’m ready to frolic.”

“You can frolic to your heart’s content in Malibu. Plane is set to leave first thing in the morning. That works for you?”

“Yeah.” I release a pent-up breath. “I still have to get some work done while we’re gone, but I need a break. Especially after the call I just had with Zere.”

“Didn’t go well?”

I bark out a laugh void of all humor. “That’s one way of putting it. Disastrous would be another.”

“Maybe I should have talked to her first.”

“I don’t think that would have helped. I don’t think anything would except us not being together.”

“Well, fuck that.”

“Agreed,” I reply softly, meaning it in spite of the mess we’ve made.

“She was angry?”

“And hurt. She asked point-blank if I fucked you on her birthday,” I tell him with quiet misery. And it does make me miserable that she suspects and that it hurts her so badly.

“She was probably in bed with Charles that night,” Maverick says.

“Oh, undoubtedly. She’s in Paris with him now.”

“Wait, and she’s angry that we’re together? How does that make sense?”

“It doesn’t and yet it does. I’m a woman and on some level it makes perfect sense to me.”

“So what did she say about the show?”

“She needs to think about it, but I don’t hold out much hope that we’ll be able to work together. She seemed to agree that Chapel should still get a show, but it’s just my role that is in question.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“I will,” I correct.

“Being in a relationship means helping each other, Hendrix. Are you saying you don’t want to help me when I need it?”

“Of course not. You know it’s not the same.”

“Because I have a lot more money? You’re gonna hold that

against me?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"When Soledad was going through all that shit with her ex, were you there for her? You said she had to rebuild her life from scratch."

"She did."

"And did you and Yasmen help her?"

My thoughts drift back to the times we helped Soledad prepare gift baskets she sold to earn money. To all the times I'd ferry her daughters to practices so Soledad could work an event. To the times I gave her money for her mortgage when she was on the verge of losing her house. I would do it all again. A hundred times and for as long as I had to.

"Of course I helped Sol," I say. "She's my girl."

"And you're mine."

There's a possessiveness in his tone that should make my feminist tendencies bristle, but it instead makes something inside me purr.

"You'd help me if I needed it, right?" he persists.

"However I could, yes."

"I know you would because that's the kind of person you are. Your big heart, that generosity, is one of my favorite things about you. You always extend it to everyone else. It's time you let someone do that for you. Let *me* do that for you."

"I've been doing me for a long time. I pride myself on my independence."

"I don't want to take that from you, but I also don't want you worrying about people thinking you're using me to get ahead. I've learned to block out the noise of other people's opinions and live my life the way I want to. The way that makes me happy, and you make me happy, Hen."

The words settle over my anxiety, my frustration, and I can't suppress the smile that reaches my lips. "You make me happy, too."

"Good, then block out the noise, and let's just be us. Inside this relationship, we know why we're here. Remember, let's just be good to each other, okay?"

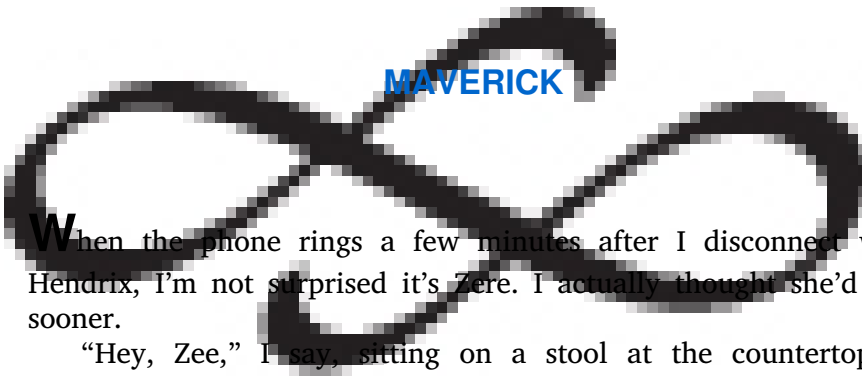
Be good to each other.

It sounds so simple, yet it feels like a new concept. That I would make myself vulnerable to someone this way, and trust that he has my best interest at heart and that he would trust that I feel the

same.

"Okay," I say after a few moments. "Let's be good to each other."

CHAPTER 34



MAVERICK

When the phone rings a few minutes after I disconnect with Hendrix, I'm not surprised it's Zere. I actually thought she'd call sooner.

"Hey, Zee," I say, sitting on a stool at the countertop in Hendrix's kitchen.

"Hey, Zee?" She infuses each word with outrage. "Fuck you, Mav."

"You're upset that I'm seeing Hendrix."

"Up… upset? Why would I be upset that you're seeing one of my friends only three months after we broke up? That would be ridiculous."

"You barely knew her before *Lewks*, and your connection is primarily through business. Don't act like the two of you have been close for years."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me. You're dating, Zere, and I don't begrudge you that at all. I'm happy for you."

"Of course you are because it makes you feel better about this shit with Hendrix."

"I was happy for you before anything officially happened with Hendrix."

"Officially? Let's deal with that word for a moment. When exactly did this begin?"

The moment we met.

I don't say that because she would hate me for it. She may already hate me. Zere and I were not together when I met Hendrix,

but I would have been drawn to her even if we had. I wouldn't have acted on it, but I don't believe her laugh, her heart, her beauty and drive would have impacted me any less.

"It wasn't a start exactly," I reply after a moment of figuring out how to say this. "When we met in Miami, we connected around our shared passion for venture capital."

"Passion," she scoffs. "Go on."

I give my annoyance a second to abate before continuing.

"And of course, her mother has Alzheimer's and after what I navigated with my grandfather, I understood what she might be feeling. We became friends."

"Why her?" Zere's voice goes shrill with hurt. "She's not even your type."

"Driven? Generous? Kind? Funny?" I soften my tone. "Aren't you that type, Zee?"

"But physically, she's not your type."

My face twists into a scowl. "What's that mean?"

"I was a model, Maverick. I was on *People*'s Most Beautiful list. How do you go from me to her?"

"Wait a damn minute, Zere. I don't know who to feel most insulted for. Me, because you think I'm that shallow. Hendrix, because you don't see how fucking gorgeous she is, inside and out." I pause and gentle my voice. "Or on your behalf, because you don't understand the good I saw in you, the beauty I saw in you, outshines your physical appearance. Is that why you thought I was with you?"

"Of course it's why you were with me. Men like you who can buy and have anything they want add beautiful women to their collection. I've understood that all my life. Is this some kind of phase you're going through? A midlife crisis?"

"Let me be very clear. I think Hendrix has the most beautiful smile I've ever seen. Her face is art to me. I love her body. I think it's thick in all the right places and I've been *physically* attracted to her from the moment we met." Tension creeps across my shoulders and I squeeze the phone more tightly. "I would never be in a relationship with someone solely based on physical appearance, though. I wish in the time we were together you had realized that. For your sake."

"I'm not body-shaming. Don't try to put that on me," Zere says, a defensive note piercing her voice. "I'm just saying a man like you

can have anyone he wants."

"And I do."

The quiet assurance of my response sits between us for extended seconds, and I'm not sure where to go next. I just want to be done with the conversation. She wants me to feel like I've done something wrong, and I know I haven't. As much as I want to spare Zere's feelings in this, I won't say that.

"I don't know if I can work with her after this," Zere goes on. "Have you considered what this decision might cost her?"

"If you decide not to move forward with Hendrix as a business partner, that's understandable. I think she was prepared for that possibility." *And she still chose me, which I'll never forget or take for granted.* "That is your right. You should feel comfortable with your business associates."

"You don't care about what she's giving up?" Zere asks bitterly. "What will you offer Hendrix when the novelty wears off?"

"What if it never does?"

"You don't… You can't be saying you love her."

"I'm saying she's special to me. We're aligned in some very fundamental ways."

"You mean that she doesn't want kids?" Sobs leak through her wall of indignation. "I'm being punished for wanting to be a mother?"

"You'd punish me for not wanting to be a father again? And should Hendrix be punished for *not* wanting kids? Most men want children, but I have Tamia. I don't need that from Hendrix. It's just another way she and I make sense."

"And you and I don't?"

"Not anymore, no, but while we did, I loved you, Zere. I want you to believe that. Every love isn't forever. We can love people along the way. Relationships can begin and then end."

"And when do you think your relationship with Hendrix will end?"

I hope it won't.

It's not anything I would say to Zere. I wouldn't even say it to Hendrix in case I scare her off this early in the game, but I have a visceral response to the idea of being with Hendrix forever.

"The longer we talk, the clearer it becomes that you didn't actually know me, Zee, and that we would never have worked in the long run. That has nothing to do with Hendrix and everything

to do with the fact that you and I are incompatible in a way that is more fundamental than I realized."

"So that's it? You just discard me and on to the next one?"

"I wish you the best, Zere."

"You were the best," she whispers. "You were the best for me and the fact that you've already moved on and given that to someone else breaks my heart."

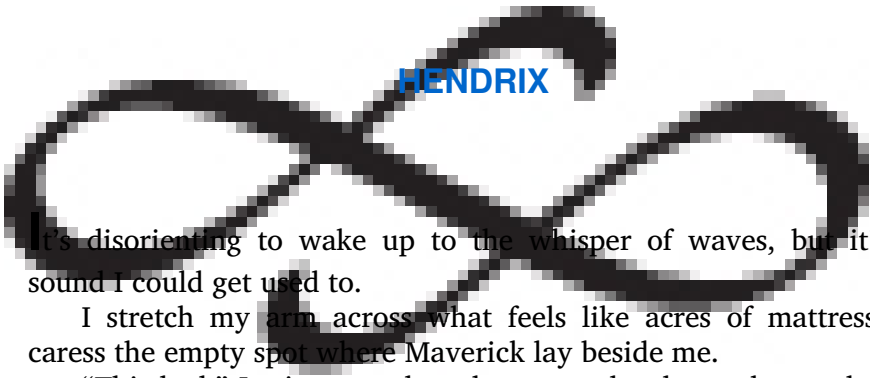
"I'm sorry."

"That's not nearly enough."

I don't know what would be, so I say the only thing I can.

"Goodbye, Zee."

CHAPTER 35



HENDRIX

It's disorienting to wake up to the whisper of waves, but it's a sound I could get used to.

I stretch my arm across what feels like acres of mattress to caress the empty spot where Maverick lay beside me.

"This bed." I scissor my bare legs over the sheets that probably cost as much as my rent, supple cotton and sinful sateen. "I could get used to it."

I only have a week before I head to Mama's, but I plan to make the most of it and enjoy every moment. The way Maverick talked about his "place in Malibu" I envisioned a pretty house by the ocean, not this gated coastal estate perched on a three-acre stretch of sand that kisses the Pacific.

I could just live in this bedroom. It's massive with a California king, sitting room situated by a two-sided fireplace, and a balcony overseeing the ocean. I would gladly stay here all day, but unfortunately my video call in a couple of hours sets a different agenda.

"Get your ass up," I grumble into the pillow of my dreams.

Naked, I shuffle into the bathroom with its poured terrazzo floors and spa bathtub, the epitome of luxury. I brush my teeth, wash my face, and take off my scarf so the long braids spill to my waist. I need low-maintenance hair because I have no idea what's waiting for me at Mama's or what I'll need to do. For now, Maverick says he wants to take care of me, and the last of my resistance has been worn down.

I grab Maverick's navy-blue silk robe from its hook in the closet

and pull it on. Drawing the lapels up to my nose, I inhale traces of him, clean and masculine and expensive. I pad down the stairs to find him. The low rumble of his voice on the phone in his office spurs me to indulge my curiosity and explore a little. Last night I didn't inspect the infinity pool, guest house, or subterranean garage. Soledad would die over the Bulthaup kitchen and the living room with its soaring ceiling and breathtaking ocean view. I swear I'm caught in an unimaginably opulent dream.

But it's Maverick's home. One of them.

I hesitate outside the open door to his office when I hear him still on his call.

"I don't give a damn," he says, voice terse. "Figure that shit out and come back with a solution, not more excuses. I don't have time to walk you through every step of this process. Do your fucking job."

I've never really heard him in mogul mode, and gotta say… it stirs the juices. I'm tempted to slide under that desk on my knees, pull him out, and greet him properly. When he catches sight of me, his tight mouth yields a smile and he waves me in. His office is all glass and chrome and panoramic ocean views, the coolness balanced with warm touches of brown and cream, suede and leather. The desk's surface is completely clear save for his iPad. I settle on the edge of the desk and wait for him to finish his call. Hands free since he's using his headphones, he pulls my foot to rest on his knee. The robe falls aside, giving him a clear view of bare legs and the shadowy secrets between them.

"That could work," he says on his phone call as he kisses the arch of my foot and then sucks my calf. He looks up at me with flirty eyes and something so hot and sweet my synapses fry.

"I do remember," he mutters, kissing his way around my ankle. "Work on that."

His tongue licking at the soft skin behind my knee coaxes a gasp from me and I tip my head back, palms flat to the desktop. Dragging his chair closer, he pulls my thighs onto his shoulders and buries his face between my legs, reaching to pull me open and lick up my center.

"Jesus," I moan as he sucks my clit and bites at all the tingling, begging flesh he can get his mouth on.

He suddenly scoots back—breathing hard, mouth wet, eyes feral. "Yeah, I'm here, Collin. I heard you."

He closes his eyes and pulls back an inch, letting my leg slide away with seeming reluctance.

"Sorry." He blinks and licks his lips. "I got distracted. Repeat that. I missed what you said."

I chuckle and stand.

"Later," I whisper. "Have you eaten breakfast?"

He shakes his head no, grasping me by the nape to pull me down for a kiss. His tongue explores the bow of my lip and he sucks the bottom one noisily, greedily. Tasting myself on him remains one of the most erotic things I've ever experienced, the fusion of us carried on his lips and tongue.

"I'll cook," I whisper, trying to get my breathing under control.

He puts the phone on mute and says, "Chef's doing it."

Must be nice.

"Go check in the kitchen. His name's Laurenz."

He unmutes the call and swats my ass before swiveling his chair to face the ocean.

"That's better," he tells the caller. "How soon can you get that done?"

I stride to the kitchen and find a tall man with olive skin and wavy dark hair that brushes his shoulders cooking on a NASA-looking stove I probably wouldn't even know how to get started. He glances up and smiles, seeming completely at ease in his board shorts and San Diego Waves T-shirt.

"You must be Ms. Barry," he says, never missing a beat dicing red peppers on a cutting board. "I'm making Maverick an omelet. Want one?"

"You can call me Hendrix." Conscious of being naked beneath the robe, I pull the collar closer around my neck. "An omelet would be great. Cheese and mushrooms?"

"Of course." He whisks eggs and tilts his head queryingly. "That's all you want?"

"If you have chicken or turkey sausage, I'll take that, too."

"Got it. Ready in just a few minutes."

"Thank you." I point a thumb over my shoulder. "I'm gonna go get dressed. Be back in a bit."

I walk swiftly back up the stairs to Maverick's bedroom. Ignoring the temptation of the sunken bathtub that could probably hold three grown men, I opt for the shower. I make it quick, racing through my skin care, spraying my braids and laying the edges into

soft waves at my hairline. I toss on a white sundress with capped sleeves and tiny pink-and-green eyelet flowers. It's cool and casual, comfortable, feminine.

When I make it back downstairs to the kitchen, three pairs of eyes lift to greet me, making my steps falter at the entrance. Maverick, Chef Laurenz, and Maverick's father. Maverick rises and comes over to slip his arm around my waist.

"Pop," he says, squeezing my hip. "You remember Hendrix Barry?"

"From the playoffs, right?" Chris Bell asks, smiling even as he tucks into French toast topped with powdered sugar and strawberries. "You doing all right this morning?"

"Yes, sir." I try to act perfectly normal, like that wasn't only a month ago and now I'm obviously smashing his son. "Good to see you again."

"You a Southern girl, huh?" Mr. Bell smiles. "That pretty accent and them manners your mama must've taught you."

"Can't get rid of either one of 'em," I tell him, laughing. "Believe me, I've tried."

"I like them both." Maverick drops a kiss to my forehead. "Very much. Come, eat."

He guides me over to the empty seat between him and his father, pulling the chair out for me.

"Thank you." I pick up my glass of orange juice and take a sip, hoping it covers how unexpectedly nervous I am seeing his father like *this*, freshly fucked and obviously staying. Maverick's head was between my legs not half an hour ago.

Father, forgive me for I have whored.

The conversation goes on around me for a few minutes while I pull myself together. Maverick must be reading my mind or picking up on my uncharacteristic reticence, because he smirks at me and licks around his mouth like he's making sure he didn't miss a spot. My jaw drops and I stare at him disbelievingly, checking to see if his father or Laurenz have noticed.

"Got some nerve wearing that shit in this house," Mr. Bell says, nodding at Laurenz's Waves T-shirt.

"I'm a San Diego boy," Laurenz laughs, pouring eggs into a pan. "You know I gotta represent us winning our first championship. I promise when Mav buys the Vipers, I'll get a Vegas shirt, hat, signs. The works. For now, let me enjoy my city's first ring."

“August West finally did it.” Mr. Bell’s tone is begrudgingly admiring. “He earned it, but we coming for that crown next season.”

“And Kenan Ross did it,” Maverick says. “Got him a piece of the team.”

“I hate the Waves right now,” Mr. Bell says. “But a Black man becoming an owner, even a minority stake, is a good thing.”

“Always,” Maverick agrees. “I called to congratulate him on the win and the good news.”

“You two should meet,” Mr. Bell bites into his French toast and sends his son a shrewd look. “See what you can get into together.”

“Bolt’s already set it up,” Maverick says with a sly smile.

Knowing what their family has been through and witnessing Mr. Bell’s grief firsthand, it’s good to see father and son plotting about the team that will soon belong to Maverick. And if there’s one thing Maverick Bell usually gets, it’s his way.

I’m living proof of that.

“Your breakfast, madam.” With a flourish Laurenz places an omelet so fluffy in front of me I almost don’t believe it’s real. I taste it and stifle a moan at the perfection exploding in my mouth.

“Like I told Coach,” Mr. Bell says, “we need to make some big moves in the offseason. We play it right, Vipers have a real shot next year.”

“Front office is on board as soon as I assume ownership. Everything should be final in the next few weeks.” Maverick says it casually, but there is a current of excitement running through the words. “That team will be ours.”

“Yours,” his father corrects.

“Ours,” Maverick repeats, his obstinate tone matching his dad’s. “I would never have even dreamed of owning a pro team had it not been for you.”

“You really did it.” His father leans back in his chair and folds his arms over his still-flat stomach. He looks so much like Maverick in that moment—his mannerisms and his expression even beyond the obvious actual physical resemblance.

“Your mother would be so proud,” Mr. Bell says, and a flash of what must be agony crosses his face.

“I know, Pop.” Maverick exchanges a glance with his father that conveys so much. The grief they’ve shared, but also the sense of accomplishment that belongs to them both, too.

“Well, what’s on the agenda for today?” Mr. Bell directs the question to me, shifting the conversation to a lighter tone.

I tug my braids over one shoulder. “I have a video conference thing in about an hour if there’s a corner of this house I can steal?”

“Of course,” Maverick replies. He reaches for my hand in my lap and pulls it up for a kiss. “I hope you don’t have to work all day.”

“Look who’s talking,” I say with a laugh, threading our fingers together and letting them rest on his knee. “You were out of bed hours before I was.”

I shoot Mr. Bell a look that is half embarrassment, half horror, and almost swallow my tongue. It’s pretty obvious I’m spending the week, but I didn’t have to hang all Mav’s business out on the line to dry in front of his father. I may be wild in the sheets, but I would never have a man spend the night in my mama’s house. Not with the “Footprints” poem and the Black Jesus oil painting hanging on the wall in the living room.

“I mean…” My wide eyes meet Maverick’s laughing ones.

“You’re right,” he says, saving me from whatever awkward thing was about to come from my mouth. “I was up early getting things done so we could spend the day together. You down?”

Mr. Bell’s kind, approving smile relaxes my shoulders a bit.

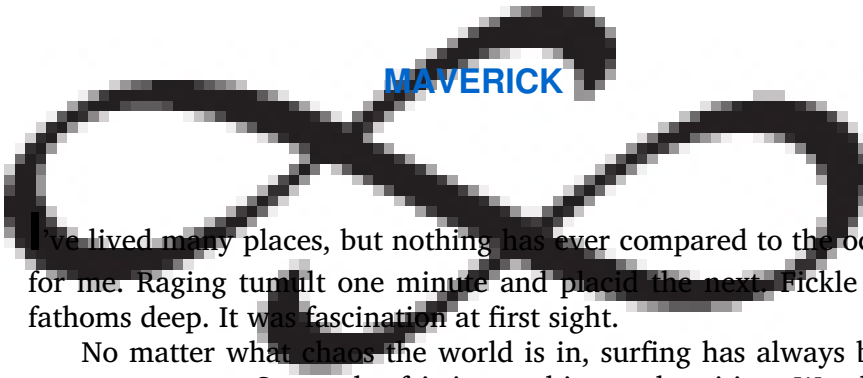
“Okay.” I stand and try to clear my plate, but Maverick grabs his and mine before I can do it. “After this meeting I’m free. What did you have in mind?”

“Oh, I already know what he wants to do.” Mr. Bell chuckles and nods to the ocean beyond the kitchen window.

Following the direction of his eyes and noting the gleam in Maverick’s, I shake my head and sigh. “Oh, God, no.”

“Yup.” Maverick swats my ass, his grin as blinding as the morning sun streaking through the windows. “My girl’s learning how to surf.”

CHAPTER 36



MAVERICK

I've lived many places, but nothing has ever compared to the ocean for me. Raging tumult one minute and placid the next. Fickle and fathoms deep. It was fascination at first sight.

No matter what chaos the world is in, surfing has always been my own retreat. So much of it is watching and waiting. Watching the water to gauge its mood, and then waiting for the waves to toss and churn and break. I'm itching to hop on my board and strike out to catch one of the huge waves I've been seeing all day. Even more appealing, though, is teaching Hendrix to surf.

Though at this point she may not agree.

We've spent a long time practicing the pop-up on dry land, and her patience with sand is waning.

"When do we get to the water part?" she whines, pulling her board up and holding it under one arm.

"I had to drag you out here, and now you want to get to the water part?"

"I wanna see what all the hype is about." She tugs her one-piece down to cover her ass cheek and lightly kicks sand at me. "You're supposed to be teaching me how to surf. Not how to stand up on the sand."

"Can't have one without the other. Come on, then, if you think you're ready."

She's not ready.

The next hour is her trying to "catch a big one," as she keeps calling it, and capsizing on her board every time. I can barely respond when she screams for me to "rescue" her in about two feet

of water I'm laughing so hard. We're both soaked head to toe and covered in sand when we flop onto the beach towel, winded and really happy. Or at least I am. Judging by the huge smile on her face, she is, too.

"I told you surfing is great." I nudge her with my elbow.

"I don't think what I did out there," she says, tossing a hand toward the ocean, "would be considered surfing yet. I need a better teacher."

"Nah." I roll over onto her, caging her with my arms on either side of her head. "Ain't nobody teaching you but—"

"Oh, shit!" She shoves me aside and takes off toward the water.

By the time I've rolled over and stood up, she has already run into the ocean and scooped up a little blond toddler, no more than two years old, who had wandered out a little too far. A woman runs up, her expression panicked.

"Oh, God," the woman says, voice shaking. "I turned my head for just a second and she was gone. Thank you so much."

"No problem." Hendrix hands the little girl over, who is laughing, blissfully unaware she may have taken a year or two off her mother's life. "I think it scared us more than it scared her."

They're still chatting when my dad walks up beside me. At sixty-two, he appears nearly as fit as he when he played in the league. Still got a few inches on me, and if his abs aren't as washboard as they used to be, he's still trim and firm.

"She's a good one," Pop says, watching Hendrix laughing with the mom as the little girl scurries around their feet. "Your mama would have liked her."

My smile is involuntary because Mom would have *loved* my Hendrix.

"You think so?"

"Oh, I can hear Priscilla now," Pop says, and shifts his voice to a higher register to imitate my mother. "Look at them pretty white teeth and it's about time you brought home a girl with some meat on her bones, Mav."

"God, that is exactly what she would say."

"And she would immediately have dragged her in the kitchen and started making her something to eat and talking about her soap operas, even if Hendrix doesn't watch. She would get an earful about Victor Newman."

We both crack up laughing because it's so true, and it feels

good to remember Mom without the miasma of grief. Just to recall and celebrate how amazing she was and how rich she made our lives while we had her.

"You only get one like that in a lifetime," Pop says, the smile lingering on his face. "Like your mama, I mean. Yeah, she would have liked Hendrix a lot."

"I do too," I say, watching Hendrix now being recruited to help build a sandcastle.

My father's deep chuckle forces me to give him my full attention.

"What?" I ask, frowning. "What's that look for?"

"Like her?" he scoffs. "Come on, son. We both know you more than like her."

Since it's useless to deny it, I figure I may as well spill it and get my father's advice.

"I've never felt like this," I confess, keeping my voice low and one eye on Hendrix in case she wraps up with the mom and kid.

"Like what?" My dad turns to me, powerful arms folded over his chest and one brow piqued.

"Like… when I met LaTanya, I was attracted to her, sure. Liked her a lot and we made Tamia, the most perfect human ever, obviously, but I never told her I loved her."

"You talked to my grandbaby? Haven't heard from Tamia in two weeks. Got over to Ghana and acting all grown."

"Pop, focus, and she's fine. We texted yesterday. So, like I was saying, I've been in plenty of relationships, the most serious of which, of course, was Zere."

"How's *she* doing? Does she know about Hendrix yet?"

"Yes, and it did not go well." I bend to scoop up a shell, tracing its ridges.

"Not surprised," my father says with a sigh. "That woman loved you. She thought you were the one. I coulda told her it wouldn't last."

"Why do you say that?" I frown, though I agree.

"You saw yourself marrying Zere?" Pop asks, genuine surprise etched into his features.

"No, but I wasn't thinking *When is this going to be over?*"

"That's not love." Pop shakes his head and angles an assessing look at me. "Matter of fact, I think if you had loved Zere, you would have compromised on the baby thing."

“Nah. I’ve known for a long time I didn’t want another kid. The time and attention and focus you *should* give a young child, I don’t have that anymore. Fatherhood is not something you half-ass.”

I catch Hendrix’s eye and she gives me a discreetly exasperated look that says *This woman won’t let me go.*

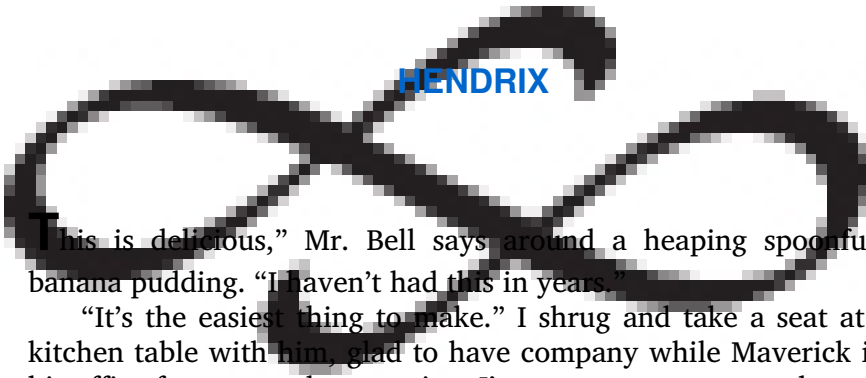
“What if Hendrix said she wanted kids?” Pop asks.

My heart sputters instead of beats. The blood sloshes in my veins and then surges like the waves at my feet. It’s one of those moments where you’re presented with a truly clarifying question; one that delineates priorities you didn’t even know you held.

Like when you realize the woman walking toward you, covered in sand and soaked by sun, wearing a smile more breathtaking than the horizon—that woman, her you’d probably do anything to keep.

CHAPTER 37

HENDRIX



"This is delicious," Mr. Bell says around a heaping spoonful of banana pudding. "I haven't had this in years."

"It's the easiest thing to make." I shrug and take a seat at the kitchen table with him, glad to have company while Maverick is in his office for yet another meeting. I've never met anyone who works harder. "I'm not much of a cook, which is ironic since my mom used to own a bakery."

He chews and eyes me thoughtfully. "I heard she has Alzheimer's. How's she doing?"

I love the way he doesn't tiptoe around uncomfortable topics. Over the last week, it's become one of my favorite things about Maverick's father. He's blunt like life is too short for bullshit and babying. Maverick must get that from his daddy.

"She does." I scoop up some of the dessert. "She's fine. Not getting worse or better, I guess. I go home a lot, but it's not the same as living in the house every day."

"Very different. I suppose Mav told you his grandfather lived with us for a while."

"Yeah. He said it was tough."

"On us all, but on my wife more than anyone. He got paranoid at one point and thought she was trying to poison his food. He refused to eat." He shakes his head and draws his brows together. "Had to be hospitalized and tube fed."

He glances up, alarm and contrition on his face. "I don't mean to scare you about… well, about your mother. I'm sorry."

"We're past that," I say, offering a rueful smile. "I know what

this is. Actually, every time I think I know what this is, it becomes something else. Usually something worse, so you're not scaring me."

"Priscilla kept him at home until it was obvious he needed more than she could do on her own."

"Those are such tough decisions." I sigh and trace the pattern in the wood of the kitchen table. "We'll have to make more of those eventually."

"You're staying there for how long while your aunt recovers?"

"Six weeks."

"You ready for that?"

I sigh, my stomach churning so much I set the dessert aside. I don't like acknowledging my anxiety about being with my mother. She's taken care of me so well my whole life, sacrificed for me without question or thought. I don't want to fail her now that it's my turn to take care of her.

"I don't know about ready," I answer after a few seconds. "It's kind of scary and sad. And I feel…"

"Helpless?" Mr. Bell offers, understanding and compassion mixing in his eyes.

"Yeah, and I hate feeling helpless. I'm always in control. Ya know?"

"I know the feeling. For people like us, like Maverick, too, the worst thing you can do is put us in a situation where we have no control."

He leans forward and covers my hand with his own.

"But it's also the best thing for us, too. It teaches us a lot about life and about ourselves. Strength is not always control. Sometimes it's surrender."

"You mean like giving up?" Because that is a foreign concept to me.

"No, not giving up—accepting. Accepting that you can't control a wave, so you ride it. You set aside the idea that things will go exactly as planned. In a situation like this, they never do."

"But what is my plan for this? I don't mean like legally or care or… I mean, how do I plan for the hardest thing I've ever had to go through? How do you plan to lose someone this way?"

"The plan is love, Hendrix." He pats my hand. "The plan is love. It's the *no matter how bad it gets or how much I want to run, I'll stay* kind of love. I've watched you over this last week, and have heard

how you talk about your friends and the people in your life. You have the capacity for that."

Tears prick my eyes and I blink furiously, determined not to let them fall. I've only known Maverick's father for a week, and I'm already crying on his shoulder? What is it about the Bell men that makes me feel so vulnerable?

So safe?

"What's going on?" Maverick asks, his shoulder leaned into the kitchen doorjamb. He flicks a frown between the two of us. "You okay, Gorgeous?"

I force a smile and keep blinking because if I actually cry, Maverick will try to comfort me and that'll only make it worse.

"All good." I stand and cross over to the counter and the foiled cake pan. "I made banana pudding. You want some?"

"Sure." I feel his eyes boring into my back the whole time I scoop some for him into a bowl.

When I turn around, he's sitting in my seat. I set the bowl in front of him and move to take one of the other chairs, but he grabs me around my waist and pulls me down to his lap.

"Mav," I mumble into his neck, conscious of his father grinning at us. "Good grief."

"Pop don't care," Maverick says, keeping one hand on my leg while he eats banana pudding with the other. "Damn, this is good. You been hiding your culinary skills in case I try to make you cook for me?"

I pull back and suck my teeth. "Boy, you already know better than to try to make me do anything."

Mr. Bell howls and pats the table with his fist. "You got a real one, son."

Maverick slides the spoon into his mouth, smiling and never looking away from me. "Oh, I know it."

Having this much sexual tension with a man while you're on his lap and his daddy's watching proves to be too much, even for me, so I stand and carry my empty bowl to the sink.

"What you kids have planned for Hendrix's last night?" Mr. Bell asks.

The smile that lingered on my lips melts. I've been dreading this all week: the last day. I fly to Charlotte tomorrow. And knowing what I'm leaving behind here sits just as heavily in my heart as not knowing what to expect at home. I turn to face them, leaning on the

counter, and waiting for Maverick's reply.

"I'm definitely not ready for Hen to leave," Maverick says, recapturing my stare as soon as I turn around. "But she's going where she's supposed to be. I do have plans for our last night, though."

"You do?" I glance down at my casual cotton shorts and tank top. "I don't know if I feel like going out."

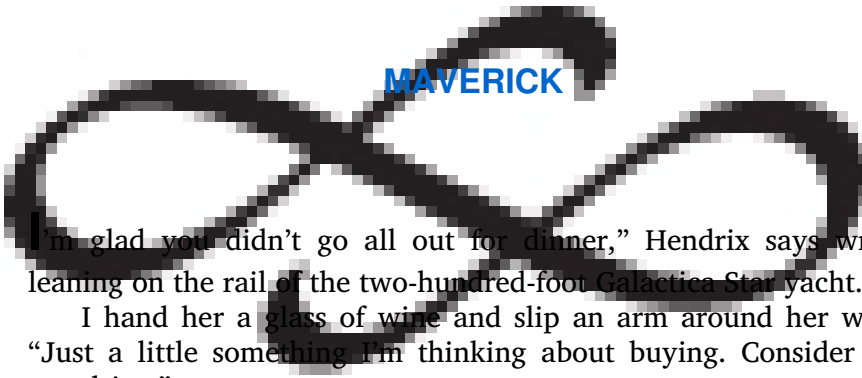
"Just put on a pretty dress and trust me, okay?"

"Oh, shit." Mr. Bell stands and walks his empty bowl over to the sink and sotto voces, "When he says trust him, that means don't."

Looking at the handsome man eating my banana pudding and winking at me, I can't help but think he's one of the few men in my life I actually do trust.

How the hell did *that* happen?

CHAPTER 38



MAVERICK

I'm glad you didn't go all out for dinner," Hendrix says wryly, leaning on the rail of the two-hundred-foot Galactica Star yacht.

I hand her a glass of wine and slip an arm around her waist. "Just a little something I'm thinking about buying. Consider it a test-drive."

"Hmmm." She watches me over the rim of her glass and sips. "You've fucked me on land and in the air. Now you just want this ass by sea."

I slide my hand down to squeeze her butt. "Technically we're on the ocean, not the sea."

"Technically, you 'bout to screw up your chances of getting this ass at all."

I dip to kiss the scented hollow of her throat. "We both know you lying."

She turns her head to lightly bite my jaw. "You're right because ain't no way I'm missing that dick one last time before I go."

We both start laughing so hard we almost spill our wine, and I don't know why. It's not even that funny, but everything is magnified with Hendrix. Passion burns hotter. The affection runs deeper. Emotions I'm hesitant to put words to take up more space inside me than anything ever has, and I'm still getting used to wanting a woman I haven't known that long this much.

When my father asked if I would have reconsidered having kids if Hendrix wanted that, I realized I probably would. And that shook me because I'm not the kind of man who redraws my lines. My convictions, beliefs, the things I decide are right for me, are usually

carved in wood, not drawn in sand. So discovering that the thing which ended my relationship with Zere is negotiable with Hendrix… I'm still processing what that means. What *she* means to me.

"Hey." Hendrix cups my cheek and presses her nose to mine. "Where'd you go? Why so quiet?"

"I've been having a debate with myself," I say, kissing her lightly. "Maybe you can help me."

"What's the debate?"

"I'm trying to decide my favorite thing about you." I run a thumb over her lips. "Is it your mouth? I mean, for obvious reasons. But then I think it might be the curve of your neck. It looks so smooth. Or maybe your laugh, though that's hard to pin down. Sometimes it booms, announces itself to everyone in the room. I think I prefer the low, sly one that keeps a secret."

"You are such a sweet talker," she says, rolling her eyes, but can't stop that smile.

I press our lips together lightly at first, but the kiss deepens, intensifies until we're exploring each other's bodies one-handed, both gripping a wine glass in the other. Elixir kisses laced with stardust. My hand is up her skirt and in her underwear, seeking out her wet heat, and she is grinding on three of my fingers.

"Mmmm," she mumbles into the kiss, pulling back and breathing hard. "I'm sure this boat doesn't drive itself. Is there someone we're giving a show for free?"

I laugh and nod, slowly withdrawing my fingers and leaving a damp trail down the inside of her thigh.

"You're right. There's like a crew of thirteen somewhere."

She glances around the deck of the yacht. "Surely this place has a bed."

"It does indeed. Not to mention a sundeck, swimming pool, sauna, jacuzzi, and a helipad."

"And a chef somewhere. Dinner was delicious, by the way. Thank you."

"Glad you enjoyed. Thought I'd give Laurenz the night off."

"It's been the perfect last night." Her face falls. "I'll miss your father and Laurenz."

"That's all?" I tease, gathering her closer, pressing the length of our bodies together.

"Of course not. I'll miss your twenty-four-karat gold sheets and

your ocean and your yacht." She leans forward and nibbles at my bottom lip. "And you a little. Thank you for making my last night here so special."

"It's not over yet."

"I know. You mentioned a bed." I set our glasses aside on a nearby table.

"Yes, but first," I say, walking over to the wall and adjusting the volume so the song I've had on repeat can actually be heard. "We dance."

"I thought you said you don't dance," she teases, hands on hips.

"I said I do under the right circumstances." I take her in my arms as the first strains of one of jazz's most iconic tunes floods the salt-tinged air around us. "You are all my right circumstances."

Hendrix rests her head on my shoulder, and I sigh as the sound of the trumpet relaxes me. "What is this? I'm not a jazz girl."

"It's Miles Davis's 'Blue in Green.' It's one of Pop's favorites songs. I love it, too."

She sways against me, a soft weight and a sweet armful. "What do you like about it?"

I let the song wash over me for a few seconds, and it's jazz, as cool as the ocean breeze.

"It was one of my mother's favorites," I say. "And they used to dance in the living room to it. This and 'In a Sentimental Mood,' or 'It Never Entered My Mind.' They loved jazz."

She brushes her fingers across the nape of my neck and smiles.

"I also love the mute Miles is using on his trumpet in the beginning," I say. "It's this sound that could blast, could be so loud, but he restrains it, and it feels that much more powerful because he holds it back. And then Coltrane comes in with the sax, which is such a human-sounding instrument, I can almost hear the words even though it's all music."

"You think there are words?" She smiles at me indulgently as our bodies sway and the tiniest breeze, a breath of ocean, stirs the air.

"Yeah, I think there are words that aren't said, but speak to the soul. That's the beauty of jazz. You have to have a receptive soul to truly appreciate it. For it to speak to you."

"What are the words?"

I hear them clearly, the words left like clues wedged between the notes, but I'm not sure it's time to say them so I just shrug and

press her head to my shoulder for the rest of the song.

"I've never danced under the moon floating on a super-yacht before." She giggles, which is an almost frivolous sound coming from someone like Hendrix. I'd love to make her laugh that way more, like she doesn't have a care. I want her to *not* have a care. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, but I have one more thing." I reach into my pocket and pull out a velvet bag. "Now before you freak out, I'm going down on my knee, but it's not a proposal. I promise."

"Truly, thank you for that warning because that would have freaked me the hell out."

"Figured as much." I chuckle, sinking to one knee and wiggling her foot out of the leather sandal she's wearing.

"Mav, what are you…" She laughs down at me as I pull her now-bare foot onto my knee. "What is happening right now?"

I fish a chain from the velvet bag and fasten it around her ankle. The gold chain links interspersed with diamonds glint in the moonlight. What sparkles brightest is the unicorn charm dangling against the smooth skin of Hendrix's ankle bone. All head and horn made of diamonds with sapphires for eyes.

"Oh, God." Hendrix's eyes zip from her foot on my knee to my face. "You got me a unicorn."

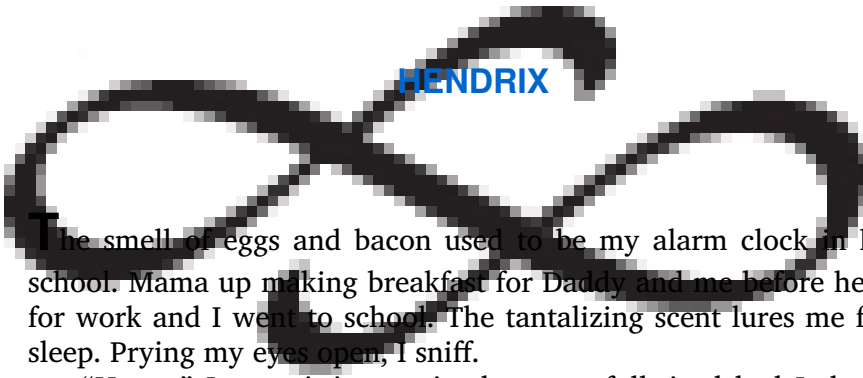
"I know you have to find your own billion-dollar company, but this is just keeping the dream in front of you." I chuckle, feeling like a punk. "It's probably silly. I—"

"Shut up," Hendrix cuts in, coming down to the floor on her knees in front of me and taking my face between her hands. "Just shut up. You should be kissing me already."

When we kiss, it's rapturous and ravenous, all growls and teeth and claws. We barely make it to the stateroom, leaving our clothes in a ragged trail on the floor. She takes me inside of her again, and I don't know if I'm losing myself or growing into something more, someone better because she chooses me. Because we have each other. "Blue in Green" is an untiring serenade that floats over the entire ship as we make love, and even though I don't say the words hidden beneath the haunting music, the words are all I hear.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

CHAPTER 39



HENDRIX

The smell of eggs and bacon used to be my alarm clock in high school. Mama up making breakfast for Daddy and me before he left for work and I went to school. The tantalizing scent lures me from sleep. Prying my eyes open, I sniff.

"Home," I say, sitting up in the same full-sized bed I slept in growing up.

I stick my feet in fuzzy slippers and right the scarf covering my braids that went slightly askew in my sleep. By the time I make it downstairs, Mama is already flitting around the kitchen carrying plates and silverware.

"I can set the table, Mama," I say, walking up to her and leaving a kiss on her cheek. "Morning."

"I got it." She bustles over to the fridge and pulls out the same clear butter dish she's had for thirty years. "You must have jet lag after that long flight last night."

"Mama, I've been home a week."

"Oh." She quickly covers her confusion by leaning into the refrigerator to search for something. "Right. I meant… Right. A week."

Dammit. I didn't mean to correct her. I'm tired and wasn't thinking.

"And flying in a private jet definitely leaves you a lot less tired, I must say," I comment, hoping to distract her from her lapse.

"I can imagine." Mama's quick smile chases away her frown, and she sets the butter on the table. "Now when am I meeting this baller?"

“Ma, who taught you to say ‘baller’?” I choke out a laugh. “That’s very boomer of you.”

“I am a boomer, right?” She frowns, setting a platter of eggs and bacon on the table. “Or am I Gen X?”

“Definitely a boomer,” I laugh. “But a cool one.”

“So when do I get to meet this Maverick? That’s a fine man.”

“How you know?” I narrow my eyes playfully.

“I can still Google, Hen. Haven’t forgotten how to do that yet.”

The delight in my chest deflates a bit and my grin dims. “Mama, I didn’t mean—”

“Girl, hush and eat.” Her smile is slightly strained, but still firmly in place when she sets the toast down, followed by a steaming bowl of heaven.

“You made grits!” I squeal like a little girl. My mother’s grits are the stuff of legend, and no matter how much I follow her every instruction, mine never turn out quite like hers.

“And look what else.” She turns to pull a pan from the oven.

“Hash brown casserole? Mama, you went all out. You didn’t have to do this.”

“I wanted to. It’s good to have you home.”

“Glad to be here.”

She searches my face. “Are you? I know it’s a lot for you to take six weeks off.”

“Well, I’m not taking six weeks off.” I load eggs and a few slices of bacon onto my plate. “I gotta work. As long as I have a phone and internet, I can still get shi—work done.”

Things haven’t changed enough for me to be cussing in my mama’s house.

I pause scooping grits onto my plate. “I think we need to upgrade the internet. It’s gotta be reliable for my meetings.”

“All right,” Mama says. “You sure do a lot of them Zooms.”

“Couldn’t run my business without them.” My spoon is loaded with grits and on my way to my mouth when Mama’s *ahem* stops me.

“We still say grace in this house, Hendrix Rae.”

“Oh.” I set the spoon back into the mound of grits. “Yes, ma’am. Sorry.”

“Heavenly Father,” Mama says, hands pressed together and eyes closed. “Child, why are your eyes open?”

How does she always… whatever. I obediently close my eyes.

“Heavenly Father,” Mama begins again. “We thank You for the food that is set before us and ask that You bless the hands that prepared it.”

Her hands.

“We ask that You’d make it good for the nourishing of our bodies,” she goes on. “Please bless those who don’t have, oh God. The ones that don’t have a home or food to eat. And we thank You for Your power. Your wonder-working power. For the blood Your Son shed that we might have life and life more abundantly.”

Was the blessing always this long?

My stomach releases a growl in raucous protest of the food that smells so good and is being withheld.

“We ask that You’d extend Your healing to our sister Geneva, who’s recovering from surgery. Lord, You know her situation. By Your Son’s stripes, we are healed. We pray for a speedy recovery.”

I clear my throat, hoping to throw a hint, but Mama prays for New Hope’s sick and shut in, the church’s building fund, and the young adult choir before we are allowed to eat.

“In Jesus’s name,” she finally says. “Amen.”

“Amen,” I say, relieved and starving. My taste buds water with the promise of Mama’s grits. As soon as they hit my tongue, I almost gag.

Lord, they’re awful. I have no idea what they are missing or what was added, but they’re inedible. I reach for a napkin to discreetly spit the food into, and move on to the eggs and bacon. Fortunately, they’re as delicious as always. After the Christmas dinner debacle, I wasn’t sure Mama should cook at all, but things stabilized some with Aunt Geneva in the house and the regimen of meds back on course. The doctor cleared her to cook with light supervision and said taking something she loved so much away could prove detrimental. So she will cook some until it becomes apparent her condition has advanced too much for that at all. Still, Aunt Geneva usually at least loosely supervises. I wasn’t up to do that today.

“Do your grits taste funny?” Mama demands, frowning and spitting hers into a napkin.

“Um, yeah. A little.” I reach for the cup of coffee set by my plate, black the way I like it. “Probably just too much salt or something. It’s no big deal.”

I don’t want it to be a big deal. One of the first ways we knew

something was wrong with Mama was her food. She'd always been the best baker for miles. I'll never forget that first German chocolate cake that was just… off.

"I don't understand." Mama walks over to the stove, opening the cabinet where she's always kept her spices. She pulls down the little white dish for salt. "I don't taste any salt, but I know I used it."

She pinches a little between her fingers and drops it onto her tongue. Her face freezes into a mask and she shoves the dish back in the cabinet. I'm surprised when she pushes past me and out of the kitchen.

"I'm not hungry, Hen," she calls as she mounts the stairs. "Clean up the kitchen when you're done, 'kay?"

When her bedroom door closes, I tiptoe over to the stove and pull out the salt dish. Looking furtively over my shoulder, I go through the same motions Mama did, pinching the salt and placing it on my tongue.

My face screws up at the unexpected taste. "What is that?"

Not salt, for sure. I taste again experimentally.

"Baking soda." I close my eyes and sigh, slumping against the counter. "God, help us."

I finish my breakfast quickly. I want to check on Aunt Geneva before I have to call in for my first meeting. They're on Paris time, so they'll be deep into their day. I need to look like I'm deep into mine, too.

I pad upstairs and down the hall, hesitating at Mama's closed door, but then moving on. I know how self-conscious she gets when she makes mistakes that remind her of how her brain is betraying her. I tap on my aunt's bedroom door. The muted sounds of Kirk Franklin's "Melodies from Heaven" make me smile.

"Aunt G," I call softly. "You all right in there?"

"Come on in," she answers.

Her surgery was a few days ago and she just came home yesterday. She's on bedrest at least for the next three weeks, possibly longer. Abdominal hysterectomies have some of the longest recovery times, and considering her age, she has to take it easy and be really careful.

She's propped up in bed, Velcro rollers in her hair, Bible on her lap.

"Morning." I walk into the room and settle on her bed. "Did you

sleep well?"

"It was kind of a rough night. I don't want to take too many of those pills they gave me."

"You had major surgery, Aunt G. Some pain is expected and taking meds to help manage it is okay." I study her face, concerned by the faint lines of strain around her mouth. "Need help going to the bathroom?"

She grimaces. "I hate this, but I think I might."

"Come on, young lady. Let's get this over with." I pull back the covers, help her to her feet and to the bathroom.

Once we're done and she's back in bed, she looks worn out.

"Thank you, Hen," she pants, slightly short of breath even from that brief journey.

"Of course." I get the covers settled back around her and fluff the pillows behind her head. "You all set? Need anything?"

"I probably won't get around to it," she says, "but hand me that big crossword puzzle book and my phone in case I get bored laying here on my back."

I grab the hefty book from her dresser. I've seen her working on these more than once, pencil clenched between her teeth and brows drawn in concentration.

"I do 'em to keep this old brain of mine active." She accepts the book and caresses the tattered pages. "I do Wordscapes on my phone sometimes, too. If I'm gonna get it, it's probably too late to do anything about it now, but still…"

Aunt Geneva shrugs and looks up—searches my face for understanding.

Get it. Alzheimer's.

I've thought of it, too. How can I not wonder if this thing that hunted Mama down later in life might one day come for me? Even if I didn't have a relative diagnosed, Black people are almost twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's. So, yeah, I think about it.

"I heard jigsaw puzzles are good, too," I tell her with a smile. "And I started taking some new supplements. I think about it, but we're gonna be fine."

I drop a kiss on her head and she nods, her lips twisting with something that is half grin, half grimace of discomfort.

"You eat? Don't neglect yourself, Hen, taking care of us old birds."

"Mama cooked some breakfast."

“Did she make them grits?” Aunt Geneva asks cautiously.

“Aunt G, you could have warned me!”

As soon as our gazes catch, our lips start twitching and we both laugh, even though this is some tough shit we’re navigating. When life deals you the worst hand, the biggest test is how you get through it. Laugh, cry, wail, whine—doesn’t matter. Just *through*. And here with them the last few days, I see more clearly than ever, that’s what Mama’s doing. What we’re all doing. The best we can to make it through.

“As closely as I watch her,” Aunt Geneva says, wiping the tears from the corners of her eyes and the last of the humor from her face, “she sometimes manages to get the salt and the baking soda mixed up. No idea how or why, but it makes for an interesting mac and cheese. I’m usually with her. She doesn’t get to cook alone, but every once in a while, something will slip past me and we end up with baking soda in the grits or something. She hates me standing over her shoulder, as she calls it, but it’s the best way for her to still do what she loves so much and stay safe.”

“The eggs and bacon are good,” I reassure her, holding on to my smile for as long as I can. “Want some?”

“Yeah, and there’s some grapefruit in the fridge. Cut me one up?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll get up tomorrow to help her with breakfast.” I glance at my Apple Watch. “I have a few meetings. I’ll bring your food, do my meeting, and then be back to check on you when I’m done.”

“Sounds good.” She points to her Bible on her nightstand. “Got my Savior and my tunes. I’ll be just fine.”

I bring her breakfast up. As I’m turning to go back downstairs, I pause at her bedroom door. “I’m gonna shower and get through my meetings,” I say. “I was actually surprised Mama cooked breakfast this morning. She’s been in her room a lot this week—not coming out much. Is that typical?”

Aunt Geneva shrugs. “Depending on how she’s feeling.”

“Depression is really common in Alzheimer’s patients. You think Mama is depressed?”

“Be hard for her not to be at least a little sad knowing what she knows.”

“Well, in my support group, they said activity helps. Exercise won’t stop the progress altogether, of course, but it can help grow

new brain cells, and that's always good!"

"I know. She and Catherine used to walk at the track, walk around the neighborhood. Lately…" Aunt Geneva shrugs. "Just not as interested in things as she used to be."

"What about her garden? That was her favorite place in the world. Now it's overgrown with weeds. No flowers. A mess."

"The garden makes her think of your daddy. Sometimes when she goes out there, it's not good."

It's a sad conversation, and I have to shove my anxiety aside long enough to shower and put on a little makeup before my first meeting. It's actually a call with a brand interested in working with Soledad. She'll be on the call, too, which makes me look forward to the meeting just a little. I miss my girls. Between the week in Malibu with Maverick, which we've barely gotten to debrief, and now six weeks here in Charlotte, we've got a long-distance friendship going.

"Shit internet," I mutter, setting up shop in my father's old office, which now doubles as a sewing room. I'm praying this weak-ass signal holds for the duration of my Zoom. It's like a museum of my childhood in here, with my father's dusty dinosaur of a desktop computer and the disabled Singer Mama used to sew my Halloween costumes the monuments, as the relics of our past.

The photos that always adorned Daddy's desk are still here. An old wedding portrait, in which my parents look terribly young and fresh and ecstatic, their arms looped around each other like they're holding on for dear life. And they did… till death did them part. That promise of unconditional, unwavering love in that photo—they fulfilled it. There are still photos of me growing up—Girl Scouts, debate team, graduation. Even that cheerleader phase I went through. I had no desire to cheer, but still felt that need to prove "big girls could" do stuff, too. I grew out of that.

I ain't got shit to prove to anyone but myself now.

Maybe tonight Mama and I can pull out her many photo albums and reminisce some. She seems happiest spending time in the past. Will it help if I find ways to go there with her?

But first, work.

Fortunately, the call doesn't last long. They know they want to work with Soledad, so we discuss the sponsored posts she'll do and even a brand trip to Paris for Fashion Week. Once the client logs off, Soledad lingers and it's just the two of us.

“Wow,” she says, her eyes wide. “That was pretty amazing, right?”

“Definitely. Exciting stuff. I’ll follow up.” I take in her curly hair in a perky ponytail, her face with a light dusting of powder and her bright eyes and smile. “How you doing down there in the A?”

“We’re good. You know we leave on that cruise tomorrow.” Her eyes light up. “It’s the first trip with my girls and Judah’s boys. Wish us luck.”

“How do Aaron and Adam do with travel?”

“Pretty good now.” Soledad shrugs. “Judah says it’s gotten easier over the years. Partly because the boys are getting older and have routines and tools that work, and also because the rest of the world is finally catching up with understanding and accommodating differences better. Stuff like line passes at theme parks or sensory rooms in big stadiums. It can still be stressful because they need that routine and travel’s so unpredictable.”

“I can imagine.”

“But we’ll be fine. What about you? How was Malibu?” Soledad waggles her brows. “How’s your billionaire boyfriend?”

“It sounds so weird and cheesy when you say it like that. But he’s pretty amazing.”

“And Zere?”

“No word.” I sigh and tap a pen on the desk. “She’s still thinking about whether she can be in business with me for the show. It’s probably gonna be a no.”

“How’s that make you feel? Any regrets about choosing Maverick?”

I swivel in Daddy’s old chair, smiling at the familiar creaky sound it makes. “Ya know, I thought I’d be more in existential crisis mode because I’ve always been so determined I wouldn’t choose a guy over my career or ambition, but that’s not what this was. I chose myself because I’m choosing my happiness.”

“Atta girl.” Soledad snaps as if I just dropped bars of spoken word. “Can’t wait to meet him IRL.”

“The girlies got you talking their talk.”

“What can I say?” Soledad runs her curly ponytail through her fist and smirks. “They keeps me young.”

“I saw that trend you did with Deja and Lupe. How long did it take you to record that dance?”

“Hours to learn and record, but it was worth it.”

“Lots of views?”

“Lots of time with the girls. They *graduate* soon, Hen.” Soledad looks a little misty in the eyes. “The momancholy is gonna be so bad. Oh, speaking of the pending emotional destruction of graduation, the girls are doing a short summer program at A&T when we get back from the cruise. We won’t be too far from you and were thinking about coming to visit when we pick the girls up.”

“Oh gosh, Sol, that would be amazing.” The offer makes me realize how much I need my friends. Things have been good here so far, but there is always this tension like anything could go really wrong at any minute, a constant low-level anxiety that becomes exhausting.

“And Yasmen wants to pop by the Grits in Charlotte.”

We both widen our eyes meaningfully because the woman who dated Josiah briefly while they were divorced is also head chef at their Charlotte location.

“Gurhhhhlll, hide the knives,” I say.

“It’ll be fine,” Soledad chuckles. “We’re all adults, and Vashti is now engaged and has a baby on the way. She ain’t thinking ’bout Josiah like that.”

Seeing how things turned out with that messy situation gives me a little hope that Maverick, Zere, and I will get our awkwardness sorted and one day live in perfect harmony. Zere in a relationship and pregnant would be the best we could hope for. It’s exactly what she wants. She just wanted it with the wrong man.

My man.

“Anyway, so we’ll definitely be in Charlotte for a bit and will come see you. Can’t wait to meet your mom and Aunt G.”

“They’ll love that, but don’t you come without the girls. I want to see them.”

“You want to *spoil* them.”

“I may have done a little shopping,” I admit with a grin. My phone alerts me to the next meeting starting soon. “Sol, I gotta bounce, but I’ll follow up with them about next steps and hope to see you guys soon!”

The internet holds on through back-to-back video calls, and I have a catch-up with Skipper to make sure all is well in Atlanta. The day zips. Mama’s pretty quiet in her bedroom, and besides a mixture of *General Hospital* and Fred Hammond’s greatest hits, I don’t hear much from Aunt Geneva either. By the time evening rolls

around, I'm done and starving.

The doorbell rings every night around this time, though, so my stomach is now set to this schedule. I open the door to yet another lady from Mama and Aunt G's church bearing an aluminum foil–covered casserole dish. This meal train thing their church does is on point.

"Just pop it in at three fifty for about twenty minutes," says Mrs. Redmond, tonight's church lady, handing over the dish. "I gotta get to choir practice, but tell Geneva I'll be by soon to visit."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

In the kitchen, I preheat the oven and lift the foil away, giving the contents an investigative sniff. Something with cream of chicken and broccoli. Another scene from the past paints itself onto my mind's eye. The backyard overflowing with our neighbors, Daddy grinning through the smoke rising from the grill as he doled out hot dogs and burgers. Mama and Ms. Catherine singing "Free Your Mind" and doing En Vogue's choreography. The memory echoes in the silent kitchen. I glance through the window over the sink, superimposing those vibrant days onto the unkempt garden and rusted-out grill tucked into a shed beside Daddy's old John Deere riding lawn mower.

I relented, let Mama stay here because it's what she wanted, but more and more I wonder if it was the right decision. This house is haunted, and Mama needs more than ghosts for company.

"Hmmmm, that smells good," I say, opening the oven and watching the cheese sprinkled on top bubbling. "Mama, dinner's almost ready."

No answer.

I set the casserole on the stove top and walk upstairs to knock on her door.

"Mama, Mrs. Redmond dropped off dinner. It's almost done. You coming to eat?"

Silence.

"Mama?" My voice comes out less certain, and I turn the knob slowly like it might delay me finding something sad on the other side.

Mama's sitting on the bed, one hand pressed to her chest and releasing staccato breaths. Her panicked eyes meet mine.

"I'm sorry," she manages between choppy inhalations. "I made a mess, but I'll clean it up."

“Mess?” I frown. “What are you…”

By her bed, her slippers are covered in vomit. Some of it is splattered on her bare feet.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll take care of it.” I rush over to the bed and sit beside her, placing my hand on her back. “What’s the matter?”

“I can’t… I can’t… breathe, Henny.” Tears fill her eyes, leaking over her smooth cheeks. “My head’s been hurting all day, but I—”

“All day? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I knew you had all your calls, and I didn’t want to interrupt. Finally got Geneva to take one of her pain pills and she was sleeping good. Didn’t want to bother nobody.”

“Mama, you’re never a bother.” I hug her to me by the shoulders. “Don’t do that again. Please, for me.”

“I’m scared.” Her wide eyes find mine. “I can’t breathe, and my chest hurts.”

“Could it be a reaction to something?” I ask, suppressing my panic.

“I don’t know.” Mama looks at me through that fog where things aren’t clear and make less sense. “I… I don’t know, Henny.”

“Stay here.” I stride to the door and call over my shoulder. “Let me ask Aunt G about it.”

I don’t bother knocking, but burst into my aunt’s bedroom. She’s knocked out and blinks at me dazedly from beneath the folds of her bonnet.

“Hen?” she asks, voice rasped with sleep. “What is it?”

“Mama. She says she’s having trouble breathing and has a headache. Her chest hurts. Has this been happening?”

Her eyes widen and she tries to pull herself up, wincing in pain. I rush over and put a staying hand on her shoulder.

“Be careful. You just had major surgery. Take your time.”

“I think it’s her pressure.”

“Pressure? Like hypertension? Mama doesn’t have high blood pressure.”

Aunt Geneva flicks a nervous glance up at me. “She does now. She didn’t want to worry you so—”

“What the hell?” I shout, unable to hold back my frustration. “Why wouldn’t you tell me?”

“We didn’t want to worry you, and she’s usually really good about taking her pills. I always…” She closes her eyes and sinks

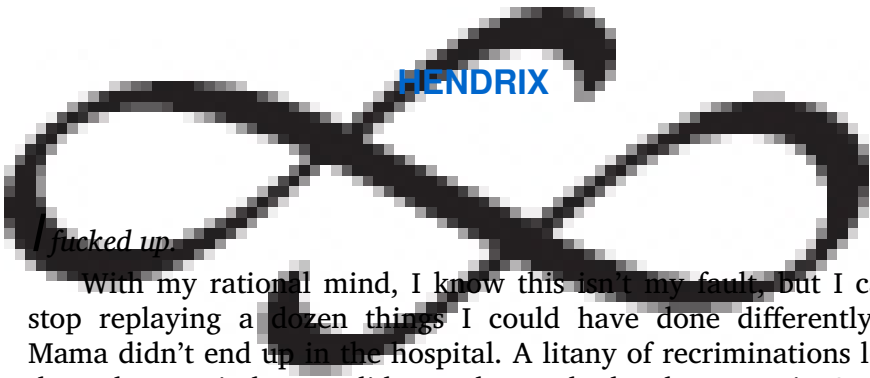
back into the pillows. “I always check behind her.”

But not for the last few days she hasn’t. Not since her surgery. And I didn’t know to check.

I run from the room and down the hall back to Mama. Oh, God, I need to call 911. I need to get her to the hospital. I need to calm down, but my heart is Vesuvius, every thought and sensation spilling over at once like lava, but I can’t explode. Mama needs me calm.

When I reach her room, trepidation and panic laugh in my face. There is no calm and no containing this volcano of emotion when my mother—my responsibility, the one who has always taken care of me—lies unconscious on the floor.

CHAPTER 40



HENDRIX

I fucked up.

With my rational mind, I know this isn't my fault, but I can't stop replaying a dozen things I could have done differently so Mama didn't end up in the hospital. A litany of recriminations loop through my mind. How did I not know she has hypertension? Why didn't I ask more questions? Why would Mama and Aunt Geneva keep it from me?

On the ride in the ambulance, Mama regained consciousness, but her blood pressure was alarmingly high. They couldn't get it down. Now they're running tests and working on stabilizing her vitals. Meanwhile, I'm pacing the waiting room, simmering on the back burner in this sterile limbo; a purgatory that smells of cheap coffee and antiseptic.

My phone vibrating in my pocket jars me from my jumbled thoughts. I glance at the screen and answer right away.

"Aunt G, hey."

"You were supposed to call me," she says, impatience and fatigue weighing her voice.

"Sorry." I rub my temple and slump into the pleather sofa. "We got here and they took her back. I've been waiting for an update ever since."

There's a sniff on the other line.

"Aunt G, you sure you're okay?"

"I am." But her voice wobbles. "The one time I'm down and can't do for my sister, and this happens. I feel guilty that—"

"Aunt Geneva, no. You are on bedrest yourself. *I'm* the one

feeling guilty that I'm not here more. How could I not know my own mother…?" I swallow tears and steady my voice before going on. "Guilt isn't serving either of us in this situation. Let's get through this and talk about what needs to change once Mama is better. Please focus on healing, on *you* getting better."

"Okay, Hen. Okay."

As soon as we disconnect, I pull up the email with the meal train schedule Aunt Geneva had her church friends send me. Their contacts are all there, but I saved Mrs. Redmond, who dropped off the casserole earlier, as "Church Lady."

> **Me:** Mrs. Redmond, hi. It's Hendrix. Sorry to bother you. I know you mentioned you had choir practice tonight. We have a situation with my mother and I'm at the hospital. I'm concerned about Aunt G being there alone. Could you or someone from the church just swing by to check on her? Make sure she doesn't try to get up, doesn't need anything, isn't hungry?

She doesn't respond right away and I'm about to move to the next person on the list when my phone rings and *CHURCH LADY* flashes on the screen.

"Hello," I answer, forcing myself to stop pacing and sit down.

"Hendrix, hey. I hate texting so thought I'd call."

"Yes, ma'am, thank you."

"What's going on with your mother?" she asks, her concern clear.

I take the next few minutes to relay what happened, trying to maintain some composure, when all I really want to do is beg someone to come sit with me, even a stranger I've only met once via casserole.

"We'll be praying for your mama," Mrs. Redmond says. "And I'm leaving choir practice now. I'll swing by the house to check on Geneva."

"Thank you so much." I flop my head back on the seat and breathe out my relief. "Use the spare key under the potted plant on the back porch so she doesn't try to get out of bed to answer the door."

"Sure will."

“And I left the casserole on the stove when the ambulance came, but I’m not sure I turned off the oven. Can you just check?”

“Sure can.”

“And if you don’t mind fixing Aunt G a plate? She was kind of groggy when we left and didn’t get to eat. I need to make sure she —”

“Hendrix,” Mrs. Redmond gently interrupts. “I got it, baby. Okay?”

My breath stutters and my eyes water. “Yes, ma’am.”

“You keep us posted on Betty. You staying there or coming home?”

I glance up the hall where they wheeled Mama away an hour ago.

“I’m not sure. I don’t want to leave Mama, but I don’t want Aunt G alone all night. Hopefully they’ll come tell me something soon.”

“How about I stay with Geneva till you get home,” Mrs. Redmond offers. “And if you need to stay there all night, I’ll stay here.”

“Oh, are you sure?”

“Baby, I won’t doin’ nothin’ when I got home but watching *Law & Order*. Y’all got a TV, right?” she teases.

“Yes, ma’am. Of course.”

“Well, I won’t be doing nothing at home that I can’t do at your house. Now you focus on your mama. We all love her and are praying for her.”

After we hang up, I sit holding my phone, humbled and stunned by the kindness of my mother’s friends; of her community. I’d never realized that I’ve built a community of strong, loyal women as my friends because Mama modeled that for me. I saw it in my mother’s friendships when I was growing up and replicated it in my way.

With Aunt G sorted, I’m back to waiting. I’ve texted Yasmen and Soledad, assured them I’m okay and will keep them posted. They’re both so busy. Yas with planning some festival and Soledad preparing to take the kids on the cruise tomorrow. The one person I want to talk to, to see more than anyone, is Maverick. He’d want to know what’s going on, but we’re still so new, and I’m going this deep already? Plus I know he’s in New York speaking at a business summit.

But… I have to call him.

He would want me to. *I* want to. I *need* to, and needing anything from a man… well, I'm still getting used to that like a brand-new pair of Manolos. Gotta walk around a bit. Gotta break this feeling in.

His phone rings four times, then rolls to voice mail. Instead of leaving it all as a message, I decide to text.

> **Me:** Hey. Could you please call me as soon as you get this message? It's important.

My phone rings a few minutes later and it's him.

"Mav, hey!" I hear the relief in my voice, but can't suppress it. "I'm glad you called."

"It's not Mav," a male voice replies. "It's Bolt."

"Oh. Bolt, hi. Is Mav okay?"

"He's fine. I wouldn't usually answer his phone, but I keep it when he's speaking. He's literally onstage now addressing the audience. I saw your message come across. I didn't mean to be… well, I thought it might be… I'm making sure it's not urgent. Maverick would want to know that as soon as possible. Is everything okay?"

My knee-jerk response is to say everything's fine, but I don't. I need to talk to Maverick. Somehow I know he'll make things feel better, even if they're not.

"No, I'm… my mother's in the hospital," I say on a rush before I change my mind.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Bolt has always struck me as pretty stoic, other than the way he burns hot for my assistant. Now, though, his voice warms with sympathy. "As soon as he gets offstage, I'll let him know."

"Thank you, Bolt. That means a lot."

"Can you give me details about where you are? Anything you need?"

"I don't need anything, but…"

But Mav.

I don't say it, but it's all I can think about; how him holding me would be such a comfort right now. How hearing him call me *Gorgeous* and feeling his strong arms around me might trick my heart into believing, even if for just a few minutes, that everything

will be all right.

I tell Bolt everything I know, which isn't much. I don't need Maverick to *do* anything. I just want to hear his voice.

"He has maybe another hour here," Bolt says. "But I'll tell him as soon as he gets offstage."

"Okay. Thank you."

"It's an understatement to say he's made it clear that you are a… priority." A hint of rare humor enters Bolt's voice. "I like my job, so I'll always get you through."

My first smile since Mama collapsed lifts my lips and my heart, which has felt like a stone in my chest these last few hours. I glance up to see a doctor down the hall. I'm the only one in the waiting room and he trains his gaze on me.

"Bolt, the doctor's here. I need to go."

"Keep us posted."

"Hendrix Barry?" the doctor asks, his brows raised.

"Yes, my mother's Elizabeth Barry. How is she?"

"I'm Dr. Katz. We have her blood pressure down a little, but want to keep her for a few days."

"Days? You said she's stable, right? Can you tell me what's going on?"

"I can tell you some, yes." He clears his throat and pushes his glasses up his nose. "You're not down as someone who has access to her medical records, so legally there's a limit on what I can share with you."

"What?" My eyes widen and I clench my fists at my side. "She's my mother. I rode in the ambulance with her. Of course you can tell me everything. I need to know every single thing."

"HIPAA laws—"

"You have got to be kidding me." I grip my braids, hoping they'll give me something to hold on to before I completely lose my shit.

"I can tell you that this was a hypertensive crisis. Her blood pressure was 180 over 120, which is very dangerous. Could have led to a heart attack or stroke."

"But she's better now? Normal range?"

"Still elevated." He watches me over the rims of his glasses. "With her levels that high, we need to monitor her a few days to ensure there was no organ damage."

"Oh, my God." I shove my fingers into the pockets of my jeans,

giving them somewhere to go.

"I can't talk with you about specific medications or treatments. John Barry and Geneva Johnson are both down to have access to her medical records."

"My father, John, is deceased," I say sharply. "And my aunt Geneva is at home on bedrest recovering from surgery. So there's only me. Are you aware my mother has Alzheimer's?"

"I did see that in her record, but I *don't* see where she has signed power of attorney over to anyone else. She is still legally in command of these decisions."

"But she is not a reliable source for many of the answers to your questions, like if she has taken her meds or how she's been feeling."

"I hear you, but we don't have legal paperwork on file indicating she is incompetent. Just because someone has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's doesn't automatically mean they're at the stage where they can't make decisions for themselves anymore." He pauses. "And do you know those things for certain? About her meds or how she's been feeling?"

Not only do I not know if she's taken them, but I don't even know what they are yet. Shame washes over me and I lower my eyes.

How do I not know everything?

"I suggest we go see your mother," Dr. Katz continues when I don't answer right away, his tone careful like he doesn't want to rouse me again. "If she says it's fine to speak freely in front of you, I'll go through everything. She can even fill out the paperwork right there in the room giving you access. How's that sound?"

"Yeah." I nod and bite my bottom lip to keep it from trembling. "That's a great idea."

When we open the door, I almost sink to my knees. Mama looks so frail in the hospital bed, tubes flowing from her arms, skin dull and eyes sunken.

"Henny," she whispers and extends her arm.

I rush over and settle into the seat beside her, taking her hand.

"How you feeling, Mama?" I croak, but hold my tears until I can give in and let go.

"Been better," she says with a weak smile. "Sorry I scared you."

"No, no, Mama. I'm sorry. So sorry I… I didn't know and you __"

"It's okay. How's Geneva?"

“She’s fine.” I smooth her hair, tousled and spread on the pillow. “Worried about you.”

“Mrs. Barry,” Dr. Katz says. “I wanted to go over a few things and ask you some questions. Can we do that with your daughter present?”

Mama looks from me to him, her expression perplexed.

“Of course,” she says. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“I’m not cleared in your paperwork, Mama, to be privy to your records.”

“Oh.” The confusion eases, loosening her brows. “Probably just never got around to it. You can tell us, Doctor.”

Mama is actually on two medications and was diagnosed with hypertension a few months ago. My irritation spikes to actual anger that Mama and Aunt Geneva have not been forthcoming about this, but I shelve that to be discussed once we’ve gotten through this crisis.

“Can you remember the last time you took your medications, Mrs. Barry?” Dr. Katz asks.

“Well, um.” Mama’s brow furrows and she licks her lips several times in a row. I don’t want her to become agitated because she can’t recall.

“I believe it could be as much as three days,” I tell him. “My aunt, who lives with Mama, had surgery three days ago. She mentioned that she usually helps monitor the medications and was out of it and groggy since surgery and hasn’t checked.”

“I don’t need Geneva monitoring nothing.” Mama’s voice pops like a whip in sudden irritation. “I can manage it myself.”

I don’t point out that we would not be here if that were the case, but Dr. Katz and I exchange a meaningful look.

“You’re also dehydrated,” Dr. Katz continues. “And there are signs of malnutrition.”

“Malnutrition?” I gasp. “What? Mama, you’ve been eating, haven’t you? I’ve seen you eat.”

Mama glances down and traces the ribboned edge of her blanket. “Of course.”

But has she been eating *enough*? Mama’s been in her room so much while I was in meetings all day. I should have paid closer attention to her diet. Mr. Bell said his father-in-law had to be tube fed at one point because he wouldn’t eat. Several families in my online support group reported the same thing. The idea of this

happening to my mother brings home the severity of our situation, how complex this diagnosis makes life. Not just the diagnosis itself, but all the capillaries that flow from this disease. I'm so ill-equipped. I've been negligent. Inattentive. I should have… I wish I had… Why didn't I…?

I set a clamp over the guilty thoughts attacking me. Those feelings cramping my belly and squeezing my heart are for later. Right now is about Mama.

"This is something to help you sleep," Dr. Katz offers as the nurse comes in and gives Mama a pill and some water. "You need your rest."

When he leaves, I help Mama find the channel for her stories and where to watch the game shows.

"Thank you, Hen," Mama says, studying the remote in her hand. "I'm sorry about all of this."

"You got nothing to be sorry about." I sit on the bed beside her and take her hand in mine. "We had a scare. A bad day, but it'll be okay."

She huffs and drops her eyes to our clasped hands.

"My life feels like one long bad day lately." She looks at me and her eyes are as clear as I've seen them in a long time, despite today's panic. "Imagine waking up and not knowing what day it is. Or where you are."

My breath catches at this rare glimpse into how Mama is processing everything. She never talks about it. I keep quiet, afraid anything I say will slam shut the door she's cracking open.

"Some mornings to wake up and for a few minutes, not even know your name. It's like fumbling in the dark. You keep reaching, trying to find something to hold on to, but it's just pitch-black. I try so hard to remember, and there's just nothing there."

Tears burn my throat and I force words out. "I'm sorry, Mama."

"It's terrifying," she whispers, blinking at her own tears. "At first when I realized something was wrong, but I didn't know what, I was so scared. When I started needing the Post-its, I figured it was… Well, I knew."

I'll never forget coming home and seeing Post-it notes all over the house.

Your name is Elizabeth.

Your daughter is Hendrix.

Your sister is Geneva.

Your husband John is dead.

Dozens of small yellow notes scribbled with the most basic information, glowing on the walls like pinprick lights to guide Mama through the dark.

"I can't decide if I want to slow it all down." Mama sniffs and raises her eyes to meet mine with breathtaking candor. "Or if we could skip all this hard stuff and the good Lord could just take me home."

"Don't say that." I drop my forehead to her hand. "I want you here as long as possible."

"Here?" she scoffs. "Where exactly is here? Some days I don't know for sure."

I shake my head, eyes closed tight even as tears slip over my cheeks and water Mama's hand.

"Look at me," Mama commands, some of the old strength in her voice compelling me to lift my head. "Don't worry. God ain't through with me yet, so I guess I'll stay."

Her smile is wobbly, but somehow it reaches her eyes. "You not getting rid of this old lady that easy."

I let out a teary laugh and kiss her knuckles. "Good."

"I just don't want to be a burden to you, Hen." She shakes her head. "Or to Geneva. All this fuss for me and—"

"Don't even think like that," I cut in. "We're family. It's what we do for each other. It's what you've done in some way for everyone else through the years, especially me. It's my turn."

I lean forward to kiss her forehead. "And I love you. You're never a burden, Mama."

"Okay," she says, patting my hand. "Well, if I'm gonna be in this place a few days like the doctor says, I'm gonna need my stuff."

She goes through the list of things she needs brought from home. It ranges from her Velcro hair rollers to her special hand lotion she can only ever find at Rite Aid.

"And my devotional," Mama mumbles, lashes fluttering closed as the meds kick in. "It's on my nightstand."

Outside her room, the nurse pulls the door closed and turns to me.

"She'll be fine here tonight," she says. "I suggest you go home and get some rest, especially since I heard you mention your aunt is still recovering there."

I glance at my watch. It's been almost three hours since Dr. Katz

brought me back to Mama's room.

"There's nothing you can do here tonight," the nurse adds.

"I'll be back as early as I can tomorrow then."

I mentally run through my schedule and the appointments I need Skipper to cancel as I head outside. When I reach the parking lot, I glance around for a few minutes, dazed and trying to remember where I parked.

"Damn." I rub my eyes tiredly. "Girl, you rode here in the ambulance."

I pull out my phone to call an Uber, which may take longer than I'm used to considering this isn't exactly a booming metropolis. I'm punching in Mama's address, wondering if I may have to find a taxi, when a set of headlights flare brightly. I put a hand up to cover my eyes, shocked to see a silver Maybach, fully tricked with five-spoke titanium rims. When it pulls to a stop and the door opens, I almost fall to my knees for the second time tonight.

"Mav?" I whisper, half believing this is some mirage and the fatigue and hunger have me hallucinating.

But then he says the words that only he would say.

"Wagwan, Gorgeous."

In the middle of the parking lot, not caring who's watching or what anyone would think, I fling myself into his arms. More like collapse, droop. And the tears I've managed to stave off all day, hell, for weeks, maybe months, break past the restraining wall, overflow my heart, and flood my eyes.

"She was on the floor," I sob into the crook of his neck. "And I couldn't… she wouldn't… she wouldn't wake up."

Words are so inadequate to express my helplessness; the despair at not only what happened with my mother tonight, but what is happening to her and to all of us. And how this whole situation is a runaway train welded to the tracks with an inevitable crash looming. *I'm* being crushed. I'm already under the charging mammoth metal of this diagnosis. Trapped and being dragged beneath the wheels of an unavoidable conclusion to my mother's life. It's slow, but unrelenting. I'm tied to the tracks and hypnotized by the lights. It all comes crashing down and the tears are a deluge.

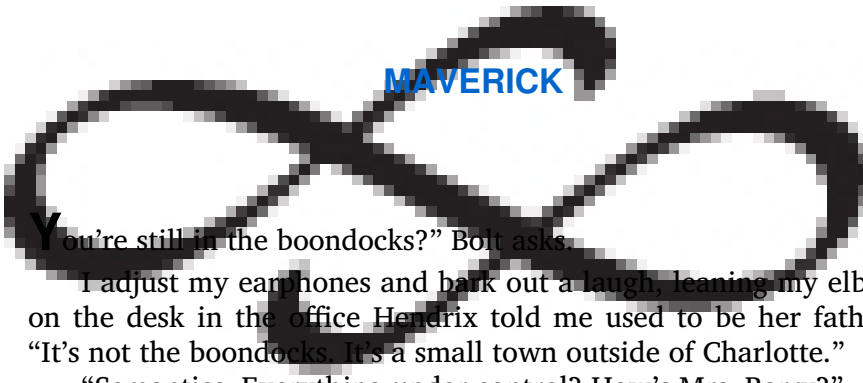
"I was so scared," I say, barely able to get the confession out for the tears.

"I know." Maverick kisses my temple and runs long strokes of

comfort down my back. “I’m sorry, Hen. I got you, baby. I’m here.”

I sniff and nod, gripping the lapels of his suit jacket as if making sure he actually *is* here. I’m still getting used to needing him, and I already don’t ever want him to go.

CHAPTER 41



MAVERICK

"You're still in the boondocks?" Bolt asks.

I adjust my earphones and bark out a laugh, leaning my elbows on the desk in the office Hendrix told me used to be her father's. "It's not the boondocks. It's a small town outside of Charlotte."

"Semantics. Everything under control? How's Mrs. Barry?"

"Much better. She's been home a few days now and is taking her medications like she's supposed to," I say. "Looking at her, you'd never know a few days ago she was in the hospital. It was a lot for Hendrix, though, especially with her aunt down, too."

"Do you need anything? Need me to come?"

I glance around the room Hendrix and I have commandeered for meetings, which is also apparently some kind of cemetery for sewing machines.

"No, I'm fine. Just keep my schedule clear of anything that isn't absolutely essential."

"So pretty much only the Vipers deal?"

"I need everything on that. We're too close. I can't drop any balls there. We're just waiting on the league's final clearance."

"How's it feel? Buying the team that dissed your dad for years?" I detect a bit of a smile in Bolt's voice.

"It feels good because the league needs more Black owners and because my father deserves this. I think it will give him something to focus on."

I don't say *now that my mother is gone*, but I don't have to. Bolt and everyone close to me knows how devastated my father has been since we lost my mom. The photos on the desk from years ago

of Hendrix with her parents remind me there is a gaping hole in their family with her father gone, too.

Grief is some bullshit.

"Andy Jr. wants to talk today at three o'clock eastern," Bolt says. "That still work?"

"Sure. I gotta get it over with. His one last chance to have any leverage over me. If I could find a way to do this deal without keeping his ass on, I would."

"The lawyers say they've exhausted all the avenues available to us, and he's part of the package. His family wants to remain involved with the leadership, even if they don't hold a controlling interest of the team."

"I know. Wishful thinking. Yeah. I'll talk to him later today."

I stand and walk over to the wall of shelves holding lots of books, mostly manuals for mechanics and car repair. I pick up a photo of Hendrix as a cheerleader, which I would never have predicted.

Wonder if that uniform is lying around somewhere… Maybe up in the attic?

"And your hotel is okay?" Bolt asks, breaking into my adolescent fantasy of sex with Hendrix and pom-poms.

"Huh? Yeah, it's fine. The important part is I'm near Hendrix."

"You are so…" He smothers a chuckle. "Never mind."

"What?" I frown. "I'm so what?"

"Man, so gone for her."

"I'm not… I mean… it's not…" I let out a resigned sigh because shit. I absolutely am. "How did this happen?"

This time Bolt's laughter booms across the line, which for a man of such restraint, has only happened a few times in the years he's worked with me.

"Guess she put it on you," he says, still laughing.

"Yeah? And what did Skipper put on you that had you fucking her the first night you met? Reckless bastard."

"Um… well—"

"'Um, well' my ass. At least I got the woman I want."

"It's not like that with Skipper," he admits quietly. "I mean, we're attracted to each other and it's… I've never felt anything like this, but we don't know each other and every time we try to *get* to know each other, we fight."

"Figure it out. Spend time with her. Hendrix and I didn't just

smash right off the bat. We took time getting to know each other."

"We've tried."

I reluctantly replace the cheerleading photo into its tarnished gold frame. "All I know is that I've been attracted to women before. Had a good time. Moved on, but this feels different. I haven't been with Hendrix long, but I can't imagine wanting to move on from her."

"You saying you want to marry her?" Bolt asks, surprise tilting the question up at the end.

"I'm saying I can't imagine a time when I don't want to be with her, and whatever that requires, I'll do."

Hendrix walks in, pulling up short when she sees me seated in her father's old office chair. She closes the door behind her and locks it, grinning as she crosses the room, an exaggerated swing to her hips.

"I gotta go," I tell Bolt, hanging up before he has a chance to reply.

With no prelude or comment, Hendrix straddles me so her sundress inches up her thighs. She loops her arms over my shoulders and kisses my neck.

"Wagwan," she whispers in my ear, the honeyed mesquite of her voice and the drawl that seems to have deepened since she's been back home stroking my nerve endings.

I palm her ass and scoot her down farther on my lap, making sure she feels how hard I get every time she walks into a room. I slip my fingers under the edge of her silk panties, kneading the plump globes of her butt. She tips her head to kiss me, and our tongues spar, battle for dominance. She bites my lip hard.

"Damn, Hen." I pull back, tugging the throbbing spot on my lip. We haven't made love since I got here. Not that it hasn't occurred to me, but everything else has been more important. Now nothing feels more urgent.

She smiles and without taking her eyes from mine, sucks on my bottom lip, licking the sting. My eyes drift closed, her kiss inebriating, at turns soothing and provoking. Her breasts press into my chest and her hips rock over my lap, urging me to rock back. To thrust up. I tug the bodice of her dress down, and her berry-tipped breasts spill into my hands.

"God, been missing these." I take one into my mouth and lave it with my tongue, suck and bite until she whimpers. She reaches

between us, running her palm over my erection.

"Need this dick." She pulls back to look in my eyes, still undulating like one of my perfect waves I wait for just the right moment to ride.

I shove her panties aside and push three fingers in. No time for playing. She gasps, her eyes heavy lidded like she's as drunk on this as I am. She dips her head, sucks my neck so hard I know she leaves her mark.

"I want to stretch for you," she pants at my ear.

I add a fourth finger and she widens her thighs, pushes down. Her body clamps around my fingers.

"Rub my clit, Mav."

She's so slick. So wet and responsive—eyes clenched shut, hips undulating, ragged breaths against my neck.

"I want to be inside you, Hen. Please." I hear the begging in my voice, but can't even care. If she breathes on me hard I might come.

Her hand shakes as she manages to slide the panties down her legs. She fumbles with the button on my jeans, and nothing has ever taken as long as it takes her to get my zipper down and my dick in her hand. She rubs the tip, gathering the pre-cum and slicking me with her fist.

"Look at you all wet for me," she rasps and licks her lips.

My heart is racing and it feels like I can barely breathe waiting for her to position me at the entrance to this temple, to her body. I thrust up, and it's hard and aggressive.

"Fuuuuuuck," I moan, pressing her legs wider so I can get in there.

She *ooomph*s into my neck, and I pause.

"Too much?" I grasp her nape gently, burying my hand in a waterfall of braids. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." She shakes her head against my neck. "Give it to me hard."

"You sure?" I ask, pressing her ass, urging her lower.

"Yes," she pants, leaning back and bracing one hand on my chest. "Try to keep up, Bell."

She laughs down at me and tightens her knees at my hips. Rocking, riding my dick with such vigor my jaw nearly unhinges. The pleasure ambushes me, and my head tips back, emptied of every lucid thought that isn't of her.

"Hen, shit." I squeeze my eyes closed, struggling to stave off an

avalanche. “Want you to come first.”

She reaches between her legs, locks her eyes with mine and pulls her dress back. The sight of me inside her, of her stretched around me and of her caressing herself, is the final straw. The last of my control loosens like a spool of thread. Never breaking the bond of our bodies, I lift her onto the desk and stand.

“Hell, yes,” she groans and wraps her legs around my hips, drawing me in even closer.

I grip under her thighs and dive in deep and hard and fast and desperate. It’s an unforgiving pace that moves the desk a few inches, the legs scaping across the floor, but I don’t stop. Can’t. It’s too good. It’d be like calling an astronaut back from the moon. I’m in another galaxy, lost in her stars. Completely removed from earth and so far beyond anything I’ve ever felt with anyone else.

“That’s my spot.” She leans back, bracing her hands on the desk. “Right there. Don’t stop.”

I drill *in and out, in and out* until she bites her bottom lip to stifle the scream vibrating between her teeth. I growl like a fucking animal, sweat rolling down my temples and forehead. My shirt clings wetly to my arms and chest. My balls draw almost painfully tight and it feels like every muscle in my body goes from stasis to spasm in an instant.

“Shit, shit, shit,” I chant into the scented, satiny curve of her neck. “I’m coming.”

She grabs my ass and pulls me deeper. “Gimme that.”

I know it’s only seconds, but it feels like I pour myself into her, literally body and soul, for an eternity. And she takes it, squeezing my ass, running her hands across the bare skin of my back beneath my T-shirt. She pushes it up and feathers kisses on my chest, sucking my nipples and running her hands over my abs. She stares into my eyes, her hands gripping my waist.

“You know you’re mine, right?” she asks in a sex-scraped rasp.

I nod because who the hell else would I want to belong to?

“And you?” I cup her cheek, grip her chin, trap her gaze. “Can you say the same?”

She drops her hand between us, touching the place where we’re still joined, a physical vow of flesh. When she looks up, her eyes are sober, mouth a soft, swollen curve.

“It scares me to death,” she says. “But yeah, I’m yours.”

“Why does being mine scare you?” I trace the slope of her

cheekbone. “I won’t hurt you.”

She nods, but scoots back a little until there is space between us. I immediately want to be inside her again, to be that intimately inseparable.

“I can’t believe I did that.” She laughs, shaking her head. “I’ve never had sex here.”

“You haven’t?”

“In my mama’s house? No way.” She looks horrified and gestures around her. “Not with the Lord’s Prayer on every wall.”

“So I’m your exception?” I tease.

“I guess you are.” She rolls her eyes and yields a small smile. She stands, folding her dress between her legs to catch the wetness. “What a mess. We don’t have this problem when we use condoms.”

“About that, I’ll show you my test, that I’m negative.” I pull my pants up and smile like a drunk still buzzing. “If we can keep doing it raw.”

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.” She smiles, still adjusting the dress between her legs.

I stoop to grab her underwear from under the desk, stuffing them in my pocket.

“Seriously, Mav?” She wrinkles her nose.

“You’re not getting ’em back so don’t even ask.”

“I cannot believe I had sex in my mama’s house.”

“You’re just a church girl at heart, huh?”

“Not really, but my mother and my aunt definitely are.” She grimaces. “I need to get cleaned up.”

“I kind of like the idea of you just staying like that all day,” I say, only half joking.

“That’s nasty, Mav.”

Her mother’s voice singing a vaguely familiar tune seeps through the office door and walls.

“Shit!” Hendrix whisper-shouts, eyes panicked. “Mama!”

She points to me, her expression completely serious.

“Now listen here, Mav. I need to get to my room without Mama seeing me like this. You go out first and tell her you’re hungry. She had a really good day yesterday and cooked. I tasted it. There’s no sugar or baking soda in weird places. She’ll take you in the kitchen and feed you. Then I can run up the hall, shower, and change.”

“I actually am hungry.” I rest a hand on my stomach. “I missed breakfast.”

“See?” She fake smiles and shoves me toward the door. “It’s working already. Go.”

“You’re a bully,” I complain, but smile.

“You like this bully.”

No, I love this…

Shit.

I’m frozen for a second, the reality of what I’m thinking and still haven’t told her sinking in.

“Hey.” Hendrix snaps her fingers in my face. “I’m sticky. Go!”

I shake my head like I’m coming out of a trance and leave the room. Leaning against the door for a second, I try to gather my thoughts and slow my heartbeat.

“You okay, Maverick?” Mrs. Barry asks, walking up the hall with a concerned frown on her face.

“Um, yeah… I mean, yes, ma’am.” I glance back at the closed office door. “Just kind of, uh… hungry.”

“Come on to the kitchen and I’ll fix you a plate for lunch. And you don’t have to ‘ma’am’ me. I know Hendrix does, but that’s just because of how she was raised.”

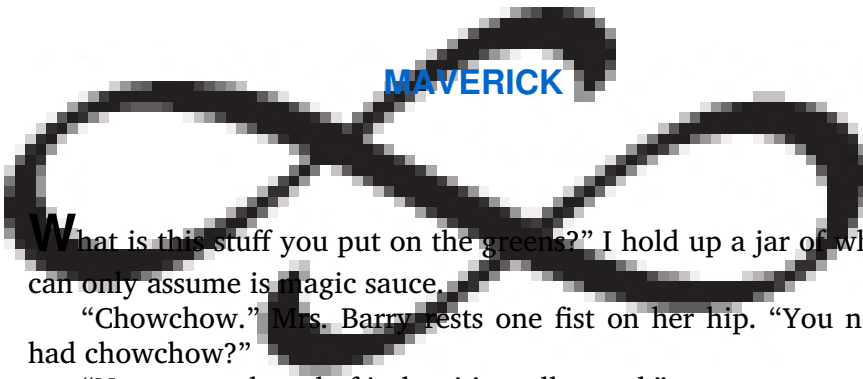
“Thank you.” I frown. “How was Hendrix raised?”

Mrs. Barry looks over her shoulder and winks. “Right.”

It takes me a second to process it, but when I do, I can’t help but laugh. God, she’s just like Hendrix.

Guess I’ll have to love her, too.

CHAPTER 42



MAVERICK

"What is this stuff you put on the greens?" I hold up a jar of what I can only assume is magic sauce.

"Chowchow." Mrs. Barry rests one fist on her hip. "You never had chowchow?"

"Never even heard of it, but it's really good."

"It's kind of like relish. You pickle some tomatoes, cabbage, onion, peppers. Stuff like that. Where'd you grow up?"

I take a gulp of sweet tea before answering, glad that Hendrix's "diversion" resulted in one of the best meals I've had in long time. No disrespect to Laurenz, of course.

"When I was really young, we lived all over because my dad played ball, but mostly Vegas and California."

"Guess chowchow didn't make it that far." She laughs and sits down at the kitchen table with her own plate. "You cook much?"

"No, I, um… Well, I have a chef who cooks for me."

She stills, fork halfway to her mouth. "She lives with you?"

"*His* name is Laurenz. He doesn't live with me, exactly, but he does travel with me a lot."

"He's just *your* chef? Don't work for nobody else?"

"Just me."

"You must pay him a pretty penny."

I grin and stir the mashed potatoes on my plate. "I make it worth his while, yeah."

"And you live in California?"

"Most of the time. Malibu."

She lifts one brow and sets her fork down. "Well, where else?"

Is this where the interrogation really begins?

"I… um, I have an apartment in New York, a house in Miami, a… ranch in Texas."

"Did you say a ranch? Like a real ranch with horses?"

"It's not a very big one," I assure her. "I'm rarely there. It's an investment."

"So you rich as snot?"

I choke on a laugh and maybe a piece of corn bread. "Yeah, I guess."

"It's all right." She pats my hand consolingly. "Bible say the *love* of money is the root of all evil, not money itself. So just do the right things with what you got."

"I try to."

"Good." She picks up her fork and stabs a piece of baked chicken, by order of Dr. Katz reducing her intake of fried foods. "My baby girl went and got her a rich man. Lucky Hendrix."

"I'm the lucky one." I glance up to smile and then resume eating.

"Hendrix hasn't brought many boys home." She snorts. "I know my daughter. I know it's not because she didn't *have* any, but she didn't see fit to bring many of them around. So you must be special."

"I hope so. She's certainly special to me."

"Did she tell you 'bout me and her daddy?"

The smile freezes on my face at her words, and I weigh my response carefully. I know how rare it is for Mrs. Barry to discuss Hendrix's father, and that often when she does, it's in a fugue of confusion.

"Just that you met really young," I say after a moment.

"Knew each other since we were kids." Mrs. Barry chuckles. "I couldn't stand his big head."

"Why not?" An involuntary smile tugs at the corners of my mouth.

"He thought he was hot stuff."

"Was he?"

"Oh, yeah, but he didn't have to act like it." We laugh together for a little bit before she continues. "He was good-looking and smart. Played football."

"Ahhh. Had some swagger, did he?"

"Lots of it. He walked right up to me and said, *Betty, it's gon' be*

you and me."

"And what'd you do?"

"Kicked him in the shin."

Our laughter mixes in the otherwise quiet kitchen again before we move on.

"How'd he win you over?" I ask.

"His mama had this beautiful garden. We had a contest every year for prize flowers. Her ranunculus won just about every time. They were famous around here. He would bring me one from her garden every Sunday."

"Like to your house?"

"He'd leave it on my front porch. No note. Just the flower. Everybody knew his mama's ranunculus. No mistaking them."

"How long did he do that?"

"Two years." She chuckles and it's a little raspy, slightly hoarse with emotion. "One Sunday we were in tenth grade, he showed up with his flower, ready to leave it, and I was sitting on the front porch."

"No way. And what did you say?"

"I said *There's a dance at school next week. Wanna go?*"

I sputter out a laugh. "After two years, just like that?"

"Just like that."

"What changed your mind?"

"I don't know that my mind needed changing. I think I knew in eighth grade he was it for me, too, which I know sounds strange. We both had some growing up to do. You know girls are always more mature than boys. Sometimes things just need to be proved out. Even at that age, he showed me and he showed me till the day that he…"

Her words wither and sorrow clouds her eyes. I've seen this look on my father's face a hundred times. Are there words in the lexicography of human emotion for how it feels to lose the love of your life? It's articulated in wails and tears, in the impenetrable loneliness that comes with losing such a vital part of who you are. Your person, closer than anyone to you, is now irretrievable, beyond reach. A mourning with no sunrise. You never know what to say when faced with that kind of devastation. I've learned to say nothing at all. No platitude or condolence could make it any better. All I can do is be human enough to listen and try to understand. After a moment, Mrs. Barry walks to the kitchen window, folding

her arms and contemplating the chaos of foliage and weeds out back.

"That was our garden," she says wistfully, and aims a smile over her shoulder that's just like Hendrix. "It was full of ranunculus."

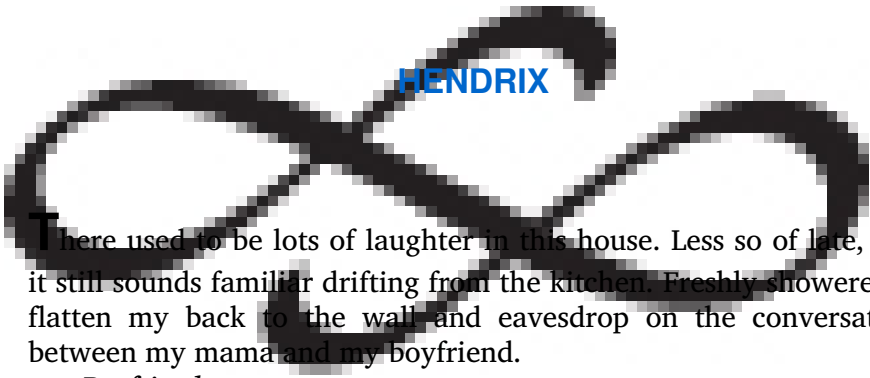
"Did you ever enter any of those floral contests?"

"No." She grabs a paper towel and blows her nose. "They were just for him and me. I haven't had the heart to get out there in…" She bunches her brows like she's concentrating, maybe trying to remember, before she shakes her head and nods to the backyard. "He'd probably say, *Now Betty, you know that's a shame. Got my garden looking like that. Get on out there, girl*."

"What's stopping you?" I ask softly.

Her smile slips and her eyes drift back to the window. "I guess nothing at all."

CHAPTER 43



HENDRIX

There used to be lots of laughter in this house. Less so of late, but it still sounds familiar drifting from the kitchen. Freshly showered, I flatten my back to the wall and eavesdrop on the conversation between my mama and my boyfriend.

Boyfriend.

I let that word boing around the bouncy house in my head for a second.

I have a boyfriend. A lover. A guy. A *person*.

My stomach growls and the smell of Mama's collard greens and mashed potatoes and baked chicken reminds me I skipped breakfast, too. I had an early London call before I screwed Maverick in my dad's old office.

Sorry, Daddy.

He would have loved Maverick. I think. He never thought anyone was good enough for his little girl. To be honest, I've mostly agreed with him. I've found men to be overwhelmingly underwhelming, with a few exceptions like Josiah and Judah.

And Mav.

Before I can interrupt their conversation and fix a plate, the phone buzzes in my skirt pocket.

Zere.

Moment of truth. Although I'm fully prepared that she'll say I'm out and can't work with her on the show, there is a small part of me that would love for us to move past this. Holding out the tiniest bit of hope, I step into Daddy's old office to take the call.

"Zere, hi," I say, settling into the office chair.

“Hey, Hendrix.” Her voice holds none of the warmth I’d become used to before this all went down. “I wanted to follow up after our last call.”

“Sure. Thanks for giving it some thought.”

“I don’t want to be in business with you.”

I close my eyes and slump into Daddy’s old chair. Even knowing it was a probability, I didn’t want it to go this way.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I reply. “But I understand.”

“In talking with my lawyers, I—”

“Wait. Lawyers? Why?”

“In case there was any confusion about who conceptualized this show or who has the right to move forward with its development. I feel confident, based on the counsel I’ve received, that you have no real claim here. Should you want to take me to court—”

“I don’t.” I stand and walk back and forth, the only outlet for my agitation. “It never even occurred to me.”

“Very naive of you. Of course there were possible legal repercussions. That’s what I’ve been investigating since we last spoke.”

“So you never even considered that we might get past this and work together? Be partners?”

“Once a thief, always a thief,” she says, her voice cooling even more to subzero. “If I couldn’t trust you with my man, you think I’d trust you with my business?”

I’m usually controlled in *bitch trying to test me* scenarios, but considering all that has happened with Aunt Geneva, Mama, the hospital—it’s too much. The chain holding me back snaps and so do I.

“I didn’t steal anything from you, Zere.” My voice is preternaturally calm, in stark contrast to the violence of my heart rattling the cage of my ribs. “You and Maverick were no longer together when he and I started seeing each other.”

“Technically, but—”

“Oh, if we’re getting technical, I recall being the one who actually created a pitch deck for this show.”

“But if you—”

“I’ve brought just as many contacts to the table for it as you have, if not more.”

“That may be true—”

“Oh, it is true, but I’m not consulting my lawyers or even

running around trying to figure out what's mine, when I lost it, why'd you take it. And you know why?"

"Why?" It sounds like the Jaws of Life had to pry the word from her lips.

"Because what is for me, is for me. I don't have to worry about somebody stealing it and I don't have to prove that it is or ever was mine. Even if it begins in the wrong place, with the wrong person, if it's meant for me, it will find me." I pause to let that sink in. "*He* found *me*."

I don't regret my words in the strained silence that follows. I'm sorry things rolled out like this, but I didn't do anything wrong.

"My lawyers will send over paperwork to put in writing that you have no claim to the show," Zere says, her voice stilted. "And that your only interest is as Chapel's manager. I did let you keep that."

"You didn't *let* me keep that. Chapel and I have a relationship that predates her time on *Lewks* and will continue beyond this project with you."

"Whatever, Hendrix."

"Look, at our big age, I'd hoped we could continue working together like grown women who are about their business, but that's obviously not happening so I wish you the best."

"You don't even get how hurt I am, do you?"

"You're wrong. I do because I know how much it would hurt if I lost Maverick. I get it and I'm prepared to accept any decision with which you are comfortable. You were the one who introduced lawyers and tried to make me feel like I've wronged you, when I know I haven't. So please don't think I'm ceding any moral high ground to you because you used to date my boyfriend."

The word that I toyed with, wasn't sure I should even use, falls from my lips so easily, as if he's always been mine. And it feels that way. There is an always-ness to my connection with Maverick, even from the beginning. An evergreen alchemy that may have been waiting since the beginning of time for the *right* time.

"You'll regret this," Zere said. "You want to give up a fantastic opportunity for a man, you go right ahead."

"This is not the end of my career in television. There will be another show, and I'll meet that moment just like I do any other that is for me. What I want, I go after, and what I go after, I usually get."

“I just bet you do. You got Maverick.”

“Oh, I didn’t go after him. He came for me.”

I don’t mean or want to hurt her, but she keeps provoking me and I’m having trouble staying in control and being magnanimous at the same time. I see right through her cellophane confidence to the hurt beneath the jibes, and my heart softens.

“You know, Zere,” I say. “We are both women trying our best and doing big things against the odds. You won’t ever catch me tearing someone else down, especially not another woman, and most especially not another Black one. I don’t want to be at odds with you. I grew up in church, and for the benediction we used to say *all hearts and minds clear*. I’m telling you that my heart and my mind are clear as relates to you. I hope, in time, we can repair what has been broken between us, but if we never do, I still wish you the best in all things.”

She’s quiet for a moment, and the only sound on the line is a sniff I’m sure she wishes I hadn’t heard.

“Goodbye, Hendrix.”

And the line goes dead.

I sit on the edge of the desk for a moment to do a heart check.

Am I disappointed? *For damn sure.*

Am I discouraged? *I don’t think so.*

Am I mad? *I don’t know.*

One thing I am for sure. Hungry. My stomach is eating itself inside out.

“Lunch,” I mutter, trying to put the conversation behind me. Something else will come. Mama used to say *You make the plan. God’ll make the way*. We’ll see about that.

The kitchen is empty, two plates abandoned on the table. I frown and look around the room as if for body-snatcher clues. And then a peal of laughter from the backyard draws me to the window.

I’ve witnessed this scene a thousand times. My mama with her gardening gloves out back pulling weeds and planting flowers, her face hidden by a big floppy hat, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever see it again. There she is, though, bending to yank a weed and looking up at the tall man who, in his expensive jeans and his vintage J’s, is clearing bushes and hauling bags of soil from the shed to the plot of land. I wasn’t sure the garden supplies I bought would ever get used, but they are today.

Ignoring my hunger, I walk outside to the garden, smiling

widely enough to encompass them both.

"I see you making progress," I say.

Mama and Maverick both glance up at me, their faces creasing with smiles.

"I figured it was about time I get back," Mama says.

"We haven't been out here too long," Maverick adds. "I promise we're not overdoing it."

"Good." I fold my arms and inspect their work. "Doctor said you're recovering very well, Mama, but we don't want you to end up back in the hospital."

"I'm fine." Mama waves a dismissive hand. "I've let this go too long. You know that Mrs. Mayer so nosy. Always poking her head over my fence in my business. Trying to see what I'm doing. Next time she looks over here, she gon' see my ranunculus coming back."

"Your mom said she might even enter them into the floral contest next year," Maverick says, walking over to me and wrapping one strong arm around my waist. He drops a kiss to my forehead and searches my face. "You good, Gorgeous?"

Heart check.

Do I regret choosing him? *Hell, no.*

I lean into his arm and let a new peace and fresh acceptance settle over me.

"Never better."

* * *

Later that night, Mama's upstairs in her room. I'm not sure if she's asleep because her insomnia is always so bad. Sometimes she walks for hours, but I don't hear her tonight and I hope she's at peace. Aunt Geneva ate and praised Mama's leftovers. Now she's catching up on *Love & Marriage: Huntsville*.

Once the house is quiet and night falls, Maverick and I take what's left of Mama's sweet potato pecan pie out to the porch and sit on the front step. Our legs are flush together and the pan rests on the curve of our knees.

"I never would have guessed you grew up in a place like this," Maverick says, scooping out a hunk of pie.

"Like what?" I turn my spoon around on my tongue and tap my head to his. "Country?"

“Charming. Quiet. Small.” He shrugs. “You’re so bold and boisterous and sophisticated.”

“Grounded,” I add. “I always think that I can fly high because I know where I came from. My family are good people, and I may not be all up in church twice a week the way Mama and Aunt G are, but they taught me humility as much as they did confidence. They taught me how to fight and how to find peace.”

“Your mom is pretty fantastic. Your aunt Geneva, too.”

“I wish you could have met my father, and I wish I could have met your mom.”

“I’ve been thinking about that all day, actually.” He balances the pie pan on our knees more securely and links our hands between us. “I also wish I didn’t have to leave tomorrow.”

“It’s only Japan.” I bump his shoulder and smile. “Hop, skip, jump.”

He cups my face and lowers my head to his shoulder, kissing my hair.

“I’ll miss you, Hen.”

His words water my dry places.

“I’ll miss you, too.” I turn my head to catch and hold his gaze. “I talked to Zere today.”

He stiffens, but then relaxes against me, pulling our linked hands up to his lips. “What’d she say?”

“She doesn’t want to work with me.”

A muscle flexes along the line of his jaw and he draws a sharp breath. “I was really hoping she wouldn’t say that.”

“Yeah, so was I, but I think I’m okay with it.”

He studies my face closely. “You are? You resenting me or regretting doing this? Us?”

“If I said yes, would you let me go?”

A smile brackets lines in his lean cheeks. “Hell, no.”

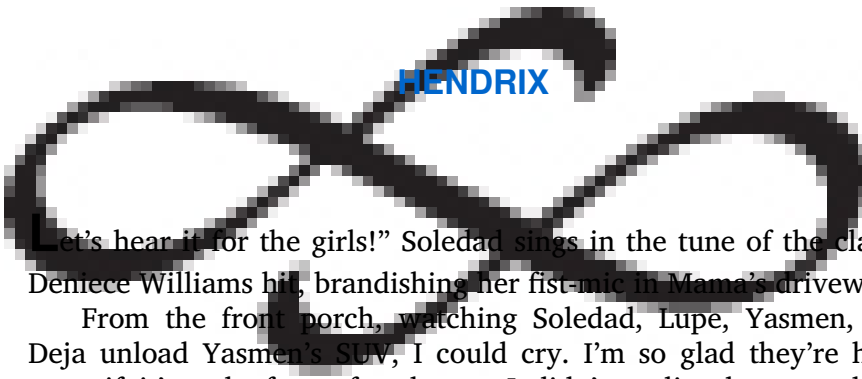
I lean forward to kiss him, hoping the depth, the hunger of it tells him all the things I’m not ready to say. That I’d choose him again and again. That I feel safer with him than any man I’ve ever been with. That when I’m in his arms, even though it’s soon and fast, choosing him feels like choosing *me* because sometimes I’m not sure where he ends and I begin. I never knew I could be completely my own person and completely someone else’s, but that’s the beautiful dichotomy of being with Maverick.

Are these the things other women thought before they gave too

much away? Before they sidelined their ambitions and dreams for a skipped heartbeat? I've always guarded against this level of vulnerability, but Maverick makes me want to give him so much because it's clear how much he wants to give to me. There is a reciprocity to us that's been missing before.

Maybe when this man says *let's be good to each other*, he really means it.

CHAPTER 44



HENDRIX

Let's hear it for the girls!" Soledad sings in the tune of the classic Deniece Williams hit, brandishing her fist-mic in Mama's driveway.

From the front porch, watching Soledad, Lupe, Yasmen, and Deja unload Yasmen's SUV, I could cry. I'm so glad they're here, even if it's only for a few hours. I didn't realize how much I'd missed them until my eyes started prickling with tears as soon as they pulled up.

"Isn't it supposed to be 'let's hear it for the boy'?" I laugh, discreetly wiping under my eye.

"Ewwww, boys," Lupe says. "We're off boys for now, Aunt Hen."

"Speak for yourself," Yasmen says, locking the car and walking up the driveway. "I'm very much still on your daddy, Deja."

"You see the level of cringe we've been dealing with this whole trip?" Deja scrunches her face into teenage disgust. "They've been like this ever since they picked us up from campus."

I pull Deja into my arms and squeeze. This is my *girl*. Even when she and her mom were on the outs—teenage girls will test their mama's nerves—Deja and I had a special connection. Always have. I see so much of myself in her when I was that age.

"You doing all right?" I ask, pulling back and stroking the karat gold braids that are new since I saw her last.

"Yeah, I'm good. Your braids are on point, Aunt Hen." Deja looks up at me, narrowing her eyes, our resident hair influencer. "You go to that lady off Clairmont I told you about?"

"Of course I did." We high-five and she walks into the house.

“Hey, Aunt Hen.” Lupe falls into my arms like she just crossed the Sahara. “You got anything to eat? I’m thirsty, too.”

I chuckle and brush the long red hair back from her face. “I think we can rustle something up.”

She passes inside and I’m left with the two women who have become my aces over the last few years. I pull them both into a hug and relish the scent and feel of unconditional love. I’ve heard people talk about platonic soulmates. These are mine. God said *Hendrix will need somebody*, and saved the fiercest, sweetest, most badass women on the lot for me. I found them later in life, but I found them and I’m never letting go.

“How you doing, sis?” Yas pulls back and smiles up at me.

“I’m good.” I sniff and swipe my cheeks. “I promise I’m happy to see you. It’s just been… a lot. So much, and I needed that hug more than I realized. Come on inside.”

“I wish we could have been here when your mom was in the hospital,” Soledad says once we enter the living room.

“It’s fine.” I lead them through to the kitchen. “She’s feeling much better now that she’s taking her meds again.”

I point to the garden through the window over the sink.

“Look at her,” I say. “She and Maverick started replanting her garden, and she’s been out there every day since.”

“Maverick, huh?” Soledad elbows me and offers a sly grin. “Sorry we missed him.”

“Yeah, he had a conference in Tokyo.” I blow out a breath because I missed that man before he was out of the driveway. “You’ll meet him soon.”

“We better,” Yasmen says.

“Next time.” I shoo them all to the table. “Now sit down. Mama’s leftovers are even better the second day.”

When we watch her, of course.

The four of them sit at the kitchen table and I go to the door to call Mama in. Sometimes too many people at once disconcerts her, but it’s actually better when she meets new people. There is no expectation she would already know them, not the same pressure as with people who expect her to remember.

“Mama!” I shout.

She looks up from the flowers she’s been planting on and off since Maverick helped her a few days ago.

“Come meet my friends,” I say, waving her in. “They’re

hungry."

We had Mama at *hungry*. Like Soledad, food is her love language, and over the next hour she loves on my friends. Her vocabulary is mac and cheese, string beans, Salisbury steak, and the sweet potato pecan pie she always had to make two of.

"Oh, this is fantastic," Soledad says, cutting a second slice of the pie and loading it onto her plate. "I need this recipe."

"It's all up here," Mama says, tapping her temple. Her smile dims. "Guess I better start writing things down before it's too late."

"Well, it tastes good," Deja says, catching the last few crumbs on her plate with a fork. "That's all I know."

"Thank you." Mama looks through the kitchen window to the garden. "It was good meeting you all. I think I'll go out back again."

"Sure, Mama." I walk over and kiss her cheek. "It's hot today. Don't stay out there too long, and keep that hat on."

I take them back to Aunt Geneva's room to meet her, too. She's a few weeks past her surgery and is moving around a bit more now, but she overdid it the last few days so is laying low just to be safe. She laughs, we all do, as Deja and Lupe regale us with stories from their summer program at A&T. Aunt Geneva attended North Carolina Central back in the day, so she reiterates they can't go wrong with an HBCU.

"Tried to tell Hendrix," Aunt Geneva tsks. "But she went on down to Georgia."

"Where she had a full scholarship," I say wryly. "And did not acquire student debt she would spend her twenties and thirties paying off."

"Well, I guess some good came out of it," Aunt Geneva concedes. "You met these beautiful people down there, but trust me, girls. There's no experience like *our* experience."

"Agreed," Yasmen says. "Aggie pride!"

"Spelman's great, too," Soledad interjects. "And so close to home."

Deja and Lupe exchange a *here we go* glance.

"Howard is impressive," Lupe says, mischief in her eyes. "DC isn't *that* far."

Soledad looks like she might have a breakdown right at Aunt G's sickbed.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Sol," I say with a laugh. "We'll let you get some rest and back to your stories, Aunt

G.”

Aunt Geneva’s had her recording of *General Hospital* paused since we walked in, and as much as I’m sure she’s enjoying our company, her attention keeps drifting back to the television. Her body may be with us, but her heart is in Port Charles.

“Y’all go on in the front room and rot on your phones for a few minutes,” Yasmen tells Lupe and Deja. “We need to talk to your aunt Hen.”

“Mom!” Deja pouts. “We want to hear about her billionaire boyfriend, too.”

I crack up laughing and loop my elbow around her neck.

“I’ll tell you all about my fine, rich, and amazing boyfriend later,” I promise. “I also may have ordered a few things from Sephora that arrived today. Check behind the sofa.”

Deja’s face lights up like a neon sign.

“You know I’m trash for Fenty.” She grabs Lupe’s hand. “Girl, let’s go.”

As soon as my bedroom door closes, Yasmen and Soledad pounce, pelting me with so many questions I fall back onto the bed and drape my arm over my forehead.

“Y’all don’t need to know every detail,” I tell them, cracking one eye open.

“But things have been good between you two?” Soledad asks, grinning like she already knows.

The smile blossoms on my face. I feel it. I know it, but I can’t stop it.

“Look at you!” Sol pops up on her knees on my bed. “That look you say I get when I talk about Judah? Hate to tell ya, but it’s allllll over your face right now, baby girl.”

“You do kinda have the look,” Yasmen says, scrunching her nose and smiling. “Is the dick that good?”

“Most definitely, yes.” I nod my head. “No notes.”

We collapse our forty-year-old selves into girlish giggles and flop onto our backs to contemplate my bedroom’s stipple ceiling that hasn’t changed since I was a kid.

“It’s more than that, though,” I continue, resting my palm on my stomach, wishing it was the weight, the strength of Maverick’s arm around me. “We just have a ball together. Whether we’re on a yacht dancing in the moonlight…”

“*Très romantique*, by the way,” Soledad inserts.

“Or we’re just laying around watching YouTube videos or *Top Boy* on Netflix. It just all feels… right with him. You know?”

“Oh, we know from personal experience. Sounds like love.” Yasmen turns her head and smiles at my profile. “You think you’re in love?”

“Love?” I draw in a sharp breath and close my eyes. “That translated to me as *Do you think you should jump off this cliff with a tinfoil parachute?*”

“It *can* be scary,” Soledad says, reaching for my hand. “Remember how twisted up I was about Judah? You helped me sort my feelings for him by asking what I wanted for myself. And he was it. Judah checked all my boxes.”

“Does Maverick check any boxes?” Yasmen grins knowingly.

“Chile, Mav checks all the boxes and writes in some new ones. He’s like what about this? You’re gonna need this other thing, too, right? Did I mention I also color in the circles? I got ya covered.”

Our laughter floats up to the ceiling and settles over us, the joy of being together again even if for only a few hours.

“Zere did finally call,” I tell them, my smile dissolving. “She says I’m out. She wants to do the show with Chapel, but doesn’t trust me after I ‘stole’ her boyfriend. Doesn’t feel comfortable working with me anymore. I’m not looking forward to telling Chap, but I gotta put my big-girl thong on.”

“Um, you did a lot to get the show where it even is so far,” Yasmen says. “I remember you working on the pitch and reaching out to your contacts. Can she completely cut you out like that?”

“You know what?” I shake my head. “She tried to intimidate me talking about consulting her lawyers and they assured her I didn’t have a case should I try to buck. I think I actually *could* have a case, but I don’t want that. I just want… peace.”

And Mav.

“Ever since I’ve known you, you’ve led with your head,” Yasmen says. “Maybe this once, *with this one*, you can afford to lead with your heart.”

“What makes this time any different?” I scoff, but it’s half-hearted because I know what’s different.

Maverick is different.

“So I had a thought,” Soledad says, sitting up on the bed once they’ve drained me of all Maverick-related information.

“Uh-oh.” I turn onto my stomach and look up at her.

“I was researching things you can do to make the home more manageable for people who have Alzheimer’s and wrote up some notes for you.”

“Oh.” I sit up and nod. “Okay.”

“I know you feel helpless,” Soledad says, reaching for my hand. “But this is something we can do. Some you won’t need yet, but we can maybe do some now and the rest as you think necessary.”

“That’s a great idea, Sol,” I say.

My girls. What would I do without them?

* * *

I talk to Mama about doing some things to make the house a little safer and easier to navigate. At first she doesn’t even want to discuss it, but once I show her Soledad’s list, she sees the merit of taking a few measures.

For the next hour, Soledad does what she does best—removing clutter and clearing out things that aren’t necessary. She is so patient with Mama, who pushes back on some things and relents on others. We consolidate most kitchen stuff into two cabinets so Mama won’t spend a lot of unnecessary time looking for things, and leave the other cabinets empty.

“You know I love a label maker,” Soledad says, and sets about labeling drawers in the bathroom, kitchen, and even the ones in Mama’s bedroom when she admits sometimes she forgets where things are stored there, too.

“Okay, Mama,” Yasmen says to my mom, gently guiding her to the closet. “Let’s choose some outfits.”

While Soledad, the girls, and I run to the store to buy a few things, including a clock with large letters that clearly displays time and date, Mama and Yasmen arrange her clothing into sets that match to help avoid confusion and possible embarrassment.

Most things on this journey with my mother feel completely out of my control, but this is something I can do to make things slightly easier to manage not only for Mama, but also for Aunt Geneva.

“I forwarded the full list to you,” Soledad says when they are preparing to leave. “That way, you’ll have it for reference as you need to do other things like installing a raised shower seat or whatever.”

“Aunt G says she wants to go ahead and do that and install a grab bar in the shower, too,” I say. “These aren’t things Mama needs right now, but when we reach that point, they will be in place. We may start taking down the mirrors because they say it can be disorienting for them to see themselves older if they forget that they’ve aged.”

“We love you, Hen,” Yasmen says, pulling me in for a hug. “Let us know if there is *anything* we can do.”

“I want in on this.” Soledad wiggles into our embrace. “I miss us all being together.”

“I’ll be home soon,” I tell them as we loosen our holds on each other. “But I’ll probably start coming here even more often. I need to be here and I need to be there. I’ll be back and forth a lot more.”

“Makes me so grateful my mama is in such good health.” Yasmen sighs. “I gotta call that woman.”

“And it makes me miss my mother even more.” Soledad shakes her head. “Cancer took her before we reached the stage of the child becoming the caregiver. You’re doing an amazing job, Hen. I know you don’t always feel like it, but you’re a great daughter.”

“Thanks, guys,” I whisper, my voice wobbling. “Love you.”

“The three of you *do* know we’ll be taking care of you guys someday,” Deja yells from the back seat of the car where she and Lupe are already seated and glued to their phones.

“Yeah,” Lupe adds. “So y’all better be nice to us!”

Man, I miss them already. Part of me wants to go back to Atlanta, back to Skyland right now, and part of me recognizes here with Mama and Aunt Geneva is exactly where I’m supposed to be.

Once they’re in the car, loaded down with Tupperware’d leftovers and a sampling of chowchow for Soledad to replicate, I go back in the house. It’s quiet, the kind of solitude that could slip into loneliness if you let it. But if I close my eyes, I can still hear the way my friends’ laughter and loud voices filled the house. I can still see Mama out in the garden planting new ranunculus. It was a good day.

The quiet is welcome when I sit down at Daddy’s desk to catch up on work I neglected while they visited. I’m looking through a contract for Imani when my phone rings.

“Nelly,” I answer, her name on my screen making me smile. “How you do?”

“I’m fine,” she replies. “Listen, I—”

“Did you see those projections Hannah sent over for Hue’s next quarter? Amazing, right?”

“Yeah, but that’s not why I called,” Nelly says, the tension in her voice strung tight.

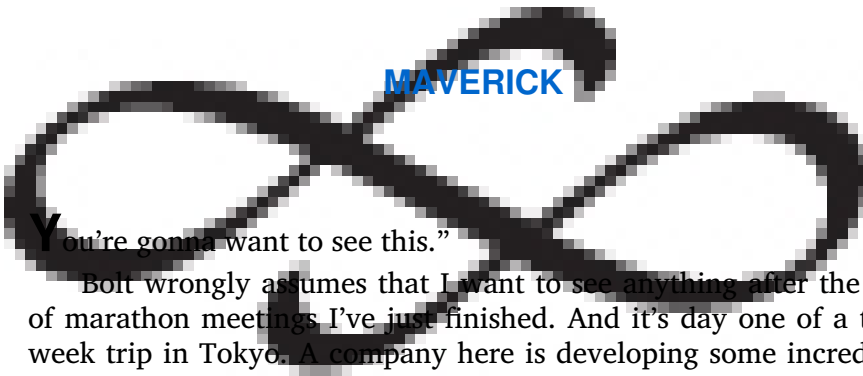
“Okay.” I sit up straight, my body braced for whatever has struck a note of fear into the voice of the most unflappable woman I know. “Nel, what’s wrong?”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but we’ve been shut down.”

“Shut down?” I laugh disbelievingly. “What do you mean shut down?”

“Aspire. We’re being sued for racial discrimination.”

CHAPTER 45



MAVERICK

"You're gonna want to see this."

Bolt wrongly assumes that I want to see anything after the day of marathon meetings I've just finished. And it's day one of a two-week trip in Tokyo. A company here is developing some incredibly cool technology for the health-care system. I'm specifically interested in how it might be applied to improve maternal mortality. LaTanya heard about it first and urged me to investigate further. The US needs all the help it can get with that, especially in marginalized communities.

I lean back, dropping my head to the couch and stretching my arms out, glad to finally be back in my hotel suite.

"Unless it's about my daughter, my dad, or Hendrix," I say with a yawn, "it can wait."

"Yeah." Bolt glances up, his eyes somber. "Like I said, you're gonna want to see it."

"What's up?" I sit forward, my body already tensing.

"The Aspire Fund is being sued."

"The fuck did you just say?" I snatch his phone and read the headline plastered across the screen. *Court Blocks Atlanta-Based Venture Capital Grants to Black Businesswomen.*

I blink at the screen, certain I can't be reading this bullshit right, but the more I read, the more my blood boils. An Atlanta circuit court has issued a temporary injunction on all Aspire Fund's grants, claiming racial discrimination.

"This group, Citizens for Equality, is claiming Aspire violates the Civil Rights Act of 1866." I clench my teeth and keep reading.

“They’re targeting the small grants Aspire issues. It’s not the venture capital investments. And these grants aren’t even that large in the grand scheme of things, but it could make a huge difference to a small business just getting started.”

“So why target such a small fund like Aspire?” Bolt asks.

“It’s not about the money or the size of the fund. It’s a broader agenda.” I check the time on my phone. “It’s like seven o’clock in the morning there. I’m gonna call Hendrix.”

“You haven’t eaten.”

“Huh?” I ask absently, pulling up Hendrix’s contact.

“Food, Mav.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

She answers on the first ring.

“Mav, hey.”

I’m instantly on alert at the soberness of her tone. I stand and prowl over to the windows overlooking the city.

“Hey.” I focus my tired eyes on Tokyo’s skyline, a palette of steel and glass, light and glitter. “I just heard about the lawsuit.”

“Sorry I didn’t call.” She sighs heavily. “I knew you had important meetings there and the time difference is—”

“Nothing’s more important and you can call anytime. I hope you believe me when I say that.”

“I know. I’m not used to being—”

“My priority?”

“I was going to say ‘in a relationship.’” She manages a truncated chuckle. “But okay, that then.”

“I’m saying it. Are you hearing that you are a priority for me, Hendrix?”

A few seconds pass that vibrate with need, mine at least to be with her, hold her, assure her I’ll do everything in my power to help.

“Okay,” she replies. “I hear you.”

“Now what is this bullshit?”

“They want to shut down our grant program for Black businesswomen. They’re weaponizing the very laws that are supposed to be closing wealth gaps to make it harder for us. It’s disgusting.”

“And you know this is about more than just Aspire, right? If they can set precedent, they’ll use it in other areas and industries to dismantle equity efforts.”

“I know, which only makes us feel the pressure even more.”

“How are Nelly and Kashawn?”

“Pissed. We all are. Preparing to appear in court in two days, so I’m flying to Atlanta in a few hours. We’re petitioning to continue operations, still be able to award grants while the lawsuit moves forward.”

“Do you need a nurse to come for your mom and Aunt G? I can send someone.”

“Thank you, but no. Mrs. Redmond and some women from their church will come through while I’m gone. Aunt Geneva is a little more mobile now, so that helps. It’s only for a day or two. I’m coming right back, but I want to be in court with Nell and Shawn.”

“At least let me send my lawyer down.”

“We have a lawyer.”

“Guarantee mine is better,” I say. “Baby, this is important. It’s not just about you wanting me to help or not. This has implications for all of us. They’re targeting you guys because they think they can pick you off easily. I want them to know there is muscle and money behind you.” I squeeze the back of my neck, the need to be with her making my skin feel tight like it’s Saran-wrapped. “I want them to know that I’m behind you. Are you okay with that?”

“You mean…” She clears her throat. “You’re one of our investors. We can easily say you’re involved because of that.”

“We could, but I also don’t mind if everyone knows how personal this is for me. That I’m *with* you, Hendrix.”

It’s quiet and I can almost hear her independence weighing my words.

“Okay, Mav.”

I let out a breath, relieved that she’s not fighting me on this. “Can I have my lawyer reach out? See how she can help?

“Yeah. Nell and Shawn would kick my ass if I turned that offer down.” She chuckles.

“Good. Hendrix, I got you.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“I’m beginning to see, yes. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. You’re my girl. Head up, Gorgeous. We’ll get through this.”

“I need to go. I have a lot of stuff to pull together and a flight to catch.”

“Of course. I…”

The words lodge at the base of my throat. I should tell her now, but how fucked up is that? She’s dealing with this court shit and focused on defending Aspire. I’ll tell her later. When I can hold her hand and look her in the eyes. I want her to see the love all over my face, not just hear the words for the first time from the other side of the world.

“You?” She prompts me to finish the sentence.

“I miss you, Hen. I wish I were there.”

She answers with a breathy sigh. “I miss you, too, and *I* don’t even want to be here, but I wish we were together.”

“I’ll send my lawyer to you.”

“See you when you get back. I know it’s a big trip. Hope all goes well.”

I hold the phone for a few minutes after she hangs up, thinking of all the things I should have made sure she knew.

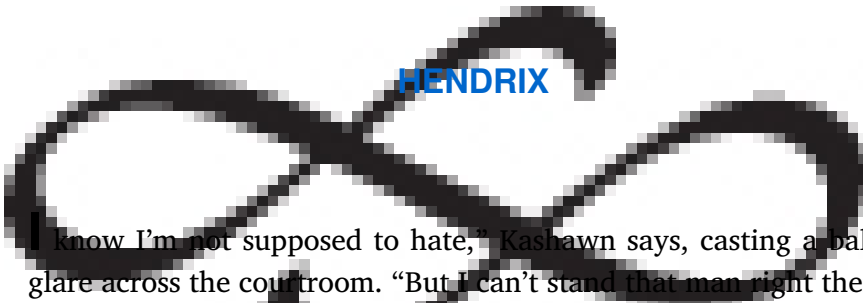
“Hey,” Bolt says, stepping aside for dinner to be wheeled into the room on a loaded cart. “You ready to eat?”

I brush past him toward my bedroom suite, ignoring the food. “Find out all you can about Citizens for Equality and report back.”

“Already on it.” Bolt gestures toward the neglected cart. “You don’t want to eat?”

“Nah.” I hurriedly yank clothes from the closet and look around for my suitcase. “We can eat on the plane.”

CHAPTER 46



HENDRIX

I know I'm not supposed to hate," Kashawn says, casting a baleful glare across the courtroom. "But I can't stand that man right there."

The man in question, Lewis Ray, is the lawyer representing Citizens for Equality, the organization suing the Aspire Fund. Nausea stirs in my stomach at the words he's spewing, the way he's twisting history and intention to his advantage. He's doing it brilliantly. I'll give him that.

"Programs like the Aspire Fund's grant initiative are not only unjust," Ray says, his lips thinning even more with the disdain he radiates. "But they are discriminatory and in violation of the 1866 Civil Rights Act."

When it's her turn, Michelle Cusch, Maverick's lawyer, argues our case with vehement expertise.

"Your Honor," she says, "I trust we all appreciate the irony of Mr. Ray using the 1866 Civil Rights Act as the basis for this case since that law was enacted to protect the descendants of enslaved people from racially based economic exclusion. Mr. Ray is now weaponizing it against the very communities it was designed to benefit. This misguided, ill-conceived effort seeks to strip Black women, the most underserved community in entrepreneurial space, of even that."

The judge hears both sides, and the tension holds the entire courtroom in a rubber band poised to pop any second. I glance over my shoulder and find my girls sitting a few rows behind me. Yasmen and Soledad glower so hard at Lewis Ray I'm surprised they don't burn a hole in that man's head. I give them a weak smile. We

have right on our side, but something feels wrong. When you're a winner, you know how to scent failure, and as the judge reads his decision, I don't smell victory.

"I've heard both sides," the judge says after less than an hour of arguments, his steel-gray eyes skimming over us like we aren't even there. "And I'm ruling that the Aspire Fund suspend the grant program for the duration of this lawsuit, and may resume or not based on the ultimate outcome."

The sheer injustice of it paralyzes me for a few seconds, and I sit in a trance, fists clenched and tears in my eyes. Chaos erupts—activists on our side loudly objecting and those supporting CFE cheering. I stand still as the storm rages around me and close my eyes, overcome by helplessness.

"Hen." Nella squeezes my hand. "You okay?"

"Nope." I shake my head, a sad smile twisting my lips. "Not even a little bit."

"You still good to speak?" Kashawn asks. "You're the best at this media shit."

When we agreed I would address the press, I don't think I truly believed the judge would uphold the injunction. Our court date is months away, and in the meantime, we can't funnel money to the women who would benefit so much from it. It's a modest program, less per person than I spend on shoes in a year, and yet so potentially impactful.

"You got this, Hen," Yasmen says, gripping my hand when I reach their row in the courtroom.

"This isn't over," Soledad says, her petite figure brimming with indignation.

"Love you guys," I tell them, offering a wobbly smile. "I'll swing through before I fly back to Charlotte tomorrow."

Nell, Kashawn, and I join hands, but the microphone is set in front of me, and a huge crowd waits on the steps of the courthouse. I swallow my disappointment, my disillusionment with a system that never seems to protect those who need it most, and speak.

"Standing here," I say, pausing to steady my voice and fix my face. "This ruling feels as personal as a knife through the heart. On the surface, it seems to be about us. A small venture capital fund offering modest grants to Black women trying to start businesses."

I sweep the crowd, sprinkled with media and their mics and phones held aloft to capture what I'm saying.

“But it’s not about us,” I continue. “If Citizens for Equality was truly concerned about discrimination, they’d look into the overwhelmingly white male firms who supply white men with the lion’s share of venture capital funding, leaving women with under two percent and Black women still with less than half of that. This court is penalizing one of the few groups actively working to close the racial-gender inequities in business, and ultimately working to close the social and economic gaps created by this nation’s disgraceful history around race.”

“I know that’s right!” someone yells from the crowd, and others join in.

“We are discouraged today,” I say, straightening my spine. “But not defeated. This is a temporary setback. Mr. Ray and his racist tactics will not prevail. We are better than this. Better than this regressive behavior that seeks to erase the few gains we have made by twisting the law and using it against those who most need help.”

I grit my teeth to stop myself from screaming curses into the microphone, an outlet for my frustration.

“We’re not done,” I say in closing. “And we’ll be back.”

Kashawn, Nelly, and I start down the courthouse steps. The whole way, Michelle makes sure we know what will happen next. Her office is fielding requests for interviews on television, podcasts, morning shows.

“That’s all you, Hen,” Kashawn says. “You have the PR training, the publicity background. You’re the natural choice to be the face and voice of this for us.”

“You okay with that?” Nelly asks.

“I am,” I say with more confidence than I actually feel, but I’ve done many things with bravado that my confidence had to catch up to. This is no different.

We agree to reconvene tomorrow once I land in Charlotte and get settled back at Mama’s house. We’re almost at the bottom of the steps when I spot the black SUV with tinted windows parked out front.

Standing there, like he stepped out of my dreams, is Maverick. He looks powerful in his black three-piece suit and silk tie. He looks like a million bucks. Correction, a billion. I’m not sure how to react or what to say. We’ve never even been on a public date, and now he’s shown up when the world’s eye is trained on me.

“I know he’s one of our limited partners,” Nelly says with a

touch of humor. “But somehow, I don’t think he’s here for Shawn and me.”

“Yeah, uh… he’s here for me.” I split a sheepish look between the two of them. “I can explain.”

“Girl, explain later.” Kashawn nudges me forward. “We’ve had a shitty day. We didn’t get our ruling. At least go get your man.”

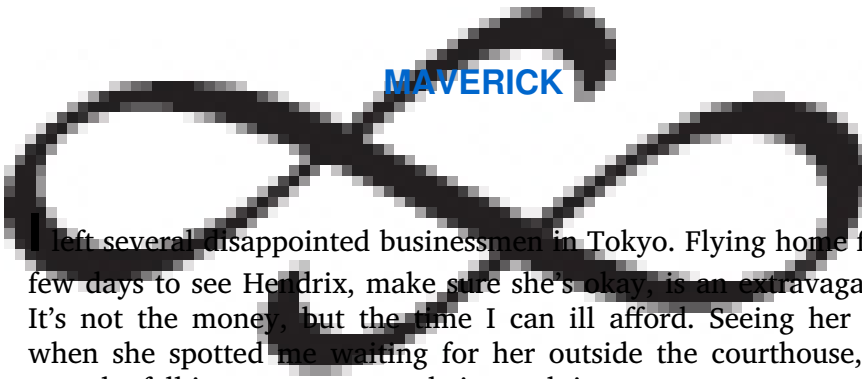
I’m still sorting through what to do, when he decides for me, for us, and opens his arms. I don’t think about the cameras or the media or the crowd. I rush to close the space between us and collapse into the warmth and reassuring strength of his arms tight around me.

“Wagwan,” he says against my ear, his hands resting in loose possessiveness at my hips.

“Mav,” I whisper, smiling at him in spite of the ache in my chest. “We lost. At least for now.”

“I know, baby.” He kisses my hair and opens the door for me to climb in. “Don’t worry. I’ll make them pay for it.”

CHAPTER 47



MAVERICK

I left several disappointed businessmen in Tokyo. Flying home for a few days to see Hendrix, make sure she's okay, is an extravagance. It's not the money, but the time I can ill afford. Seeing her face when she spotted me waiting for her outside the courthouse, the way she fell into my arms, made it worth it.

Waking up with her in bed at her place, even just for today, is worth it.

"Morning," Hendrix mutters into my shoulder.

I tighten my arm around her waist, stroking her back through the silk pajama top.

"Morning." I kiss the top of her head. "How's it feel being back in your own bed?"

"Good, but guilty." She glances up at me, the peacock-printed silk scarf covering her braids slipping into her eyes. "I know I had to come, but I really want to get back to Mama and Aunt G today. Glad my flight is this afternoon."

"You sure you don't want to fly with me? I can drop you off."

"On your way to Tokyo you can just drop me off in Charlotte?" She kisses under my jaw. "I'm fine."

"Maybe I want a few more hours with you." I coast my hand down her back to palm her ass.

"Maybe you should make the most of the time you got right now." She shoots me a wicked grin. "Look in my nightstand drawer."

"Why?" I ask, already stretching to open the drawer. I didn't take the time when I was here before to truly appreciate the

collection of vibrators, lubes of all varieties, condoms of various sizes and… flavors… that Hendrix keeps here.

"My pride and joy." Her chuckle is husky and suggestive. "We only have a few hours before we leave. Wanna play?"

My pulse pounds at my neck and my skin burns like someone lit a match to the blood coursing through my veins. Of course I hoped we'd have this before we went our separate ways for another two weeks, but she has a lot on her mind. I didn't want to press her for sex when she's negotiating so much.

"We don't have to, Hen," I force myself to say. I mean it, even though I've wanted her since I saw her on the courthouse steps. The segue from fighting for equity and justice to *can we smash* is not as easy as one might think.

She works the silk pajama bottoms down over her hips and off. I gulp at the sight of her, the smooth, thick thighs and lush hips. When she pulls the pajama top off and her breasts spill free, I almost swallow my tongue.

"You've missed them," she laughs and cups her breasts, rubbing the tips. "I need this, Mav."

"So I'd be doing you a service is what you're saying," I tease, my voice husky and heavy with lust.

"A favor, even." She slips her fingers between her legs and strokes. "Unless you make me do all the work myself."

For a few seconds, that is exactly what I want. Watching her fingers slide over and dip into the sweet recesses of her body. The way she tips her head back and moans, bends her knee to give me a clear view. I take her nipple into my mouth.

"Love your titties," I mutter, slipping my hand over the soft roundness of her stomach to marry our fingers between her legs. "And this pussy. You get so wet."

"Not all the time," she chuckles. "That's what the lube is for, but you do seem to have that effect on me."

I move down her body and settle between her thighs, using my shoulders to push her legs further apart. She palms my head and hooks one foot on my back.

"Breakfast is served," she laughs throatily. "Eat up."

I lick and bite and swipe my tongue over her. Some sound half groan, half growl writhes its way up my throat. I hook my arms under her thighs and lift, opening her wide. Her chest heaves and she pinches her nipple.

“Get a toy,” she pants. “Whichever one you want.”

I can’t resist sucking on her again, licking into her. She squirms and twists.

“I want to play with you,” she says, her eyes crawling down the length of her body until they lock with mine.

I reach into the drawer and select what looks like a pretty basic vibrator, but Hendrix’s eyes light up.

“Great choice.” She pats the empty space beside her. “Come here.”

I settle beside her, cupping her jaw and plunging in for a deep kiss.

She takes the vibrator from me and grins. “Lay back and strip.”

“Um, why? What are you going to do with that?” I ease my boxers down and off until I’m laid out naked for her inspection. “To me?”

“I’m not sticking it up anything.” She rolls her eyes. “Not today, at least. We’ll work up to pegging that ass.”

“I’m actually not sure we will,” I say dryly.

“Open your legs for me,” she commands, her smile melting away with the heat in her eyes. “You’ll thank me for this.”

My eyes never leaving hers, I spread my legs slightly. She grasps my dick, working her hand up and down until it’s stiff and stretched. My breath chops up, coming out in gasps when she strokes my nipple. She turns on the vibrator and licks her lips when she glances down at me.

“What are you do—oh!”

She’s running the vibrator across my upper thighs in circles. It startles me at first, but I settle, not sure what the hell is next, but down for whatever. With every breath, she eases her way up until the toy is at the perineum, right between my balls and my asshole. Holding it there with one hand, she steadies my dick with the other and takes me into her mouth. The unfamiliar vibration at a spot I had no idea was that sensitive, coupled with the hot, wet interior of her mouth, steals my breath.

“Shit, Hen.” I tilt my head back into the pillow and my mouth drops open. “Fuuuuck.”

She keeps that up, pulling off to lick the head, dip her tongue into the slit. The way she closes her eyes tightly and moans like it’s as good for her as it is for me in the most stimulating part of the whole thing. And that’s saying something because I’ve never been

this stimulated. I can't last and there's no way this will end any way except me inside of her.

"Hen, baby. We gotta…" I can barely form coherent thoughts. "Wanna be… inside."

She looks at me, eyes sex-drunk and heavy lidded, braids spilling over her shoulders. Her pretty mouth is stretched around me and in this position, her breasts hang heavy, framing my dick. I've never seen a more beautiful sight. She pulls off with a pop, and climbs up my body. She grabs me by the neck and crashes our lips together. Her mouth is swollen and wet and tastes like me and her. I'm ravenous, exploring her, biting her lips. I reach down and pull her up by her ass to straddle me. She rocks over me, into me, and I'm back at the edge.

"Hen, I'mma come we keep this up," I pant, pressing our foreheads together.

She nods and leans in to kiss me again. I chase the salty taste of myself on her tongue. She feathers kisses across my face until she reaches my ear.

"I want to use the toy while you do it," she whispers. "Is that okay? Some men don't like it when—"

"Why the hell you talking about 'some men' when you fucking me? Get the damn toy, Hen, and don't bring those motherfuckers in our bed again."

She chuckles, reaches for the vibe, and turns around, her naked back and ass to me.

"We need to reverse for what I have in mind," she says, settling her thighs on either side of mine and taking my dick in her hand. She glances at me over her shoulder, eyes sultry, smoldering hot chocolate.

She sinks down on me and I almost lose it right then. I'm still not used to being raw, and it's so intimate. Literally like our skin melds with the heat of it.

"That is so good," she moans. "I need to control this if it's gonna work."

"Happy to let you do all the work," I laugh, but it's breathy because, damn, she feels incredible sheathing me at this angle. She begins to rock, the muscles of her ass flexing with each movement. I can't resist framing her waist with my hands, have to touch her somewhere. She braces one hand on my thigh and the other slips between her legs.

The buzzing begins.

"Shit, shit, shit," she chants, riding me and keeping the vibrator there.

She's been edging me so long, I know I can't last. I want to draw this out as long as possible, but it feels indescribable to have her this way, with no inhibitions and totally focused on her pleasure and mine.

"I'm about to…" She tenses, squeezing my leg so tight the pain just barely penetrates a fog of bliss. "God, yes!"

Her long limbs quake with her release. She eases down onto her elbows, shoulders trembling and breaths chopped up.

"God, that was good." She looks over her shoulder and sways her ass. "Now you."

Desire spikes, galvanizing me into motion. I press her forward on her elbows and push my hand into the small of her back so her ass is high in the air. I touch between her legs. I slide two fingers in and she shivers, still sensitive.

"You…" I swallow hard and close my eyes at the thought of her coming that hard. "I need to be in there, babe."

"Come on then."

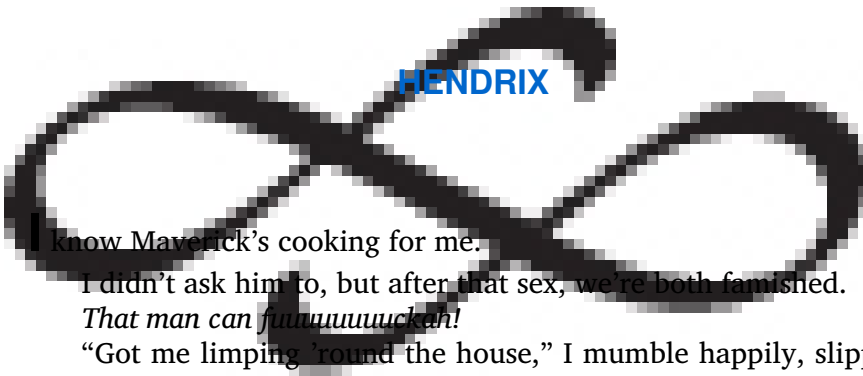
I rise on my knees behind her and sink inside. We both groan, a syncopated relishing of joined flesh. With her hips gripped hard between my hands, I snap forward again and again, the rhythm of my breathing roughening the longer I fuck her. I grab her breast, squeezing and kneading.

"Feels so good," she pants.

I pull her up, gripping her hip and grabbing her throat. The bed rocks with every thrust. As vast as my world has become, it shrinks down to this woman when I give her my body and my heart. I lose all sense of time and place when I'm inside her. I didn't know a connection could be this strong. A thread so tensile and yet so tender. Had no idea emotion could overtake reason and wisdom and have you risking it all in a public place with a party just beyond an unlocked door, or leave you surrendering everything when it feels like you are the only two people on Earth. I didn't know it could be this good, but as I shout her name, release all the love I haven't yet put into words, into her beautiful body, now I know.

And nothing else—no one else—will ever do.

CHAPTER 48



HENDRIX

I know Maverick's cooking for me.

I didn't ask him to, but after that sex, we're both famished.

That man can fuuuuuuuucken!

"Got me limping 'round the house," I mumble happily, slipping on my underwear and wincing a little at the sting. "Mav wore me out."

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

We crossed the desert sands or some shit this morning. Levers clicked into place between us on a soul level. At least that's how it felt to me.

I pull on a linen shorts romper that's cool and loose. And has pockets, a top-ten invention in my opinion. Toss my braids up into a top knot, throw on some oversized gold hoop earrings, and I'm ready for the day.

Going down the stairs, I smell the flowers before I see them. As soon as I reach the main floor, a dozen champagne roses come into view sitting on the glass coffee table. I lean down to smell one. On impulse, I snap a stem and slide the blossom into my braids.

Maverick's back is to me while he cooks. I walk up to him and squeeze his ass. He stiffens and leans back against my chest.

"I'm flattered," he says, his voice serious. "But I have a girlfriend."

"Bet she can't put it on you like I can," I whisper in his ear and loop one arm around his waist.

He shrugs. "She might be willing to share."

I bite his neck and laugh when he fake howls. "No, she won't."

He turns and splays one hand over my jaw and neck, rests the other at my hip. “You hungry?”

“I could eat,” I understate since my stomach is chewing itself.

“Sit.” He nods to my kitchen counter. “I got you.”

It’s so sexy when he serves me. He sets the plate of eggs and turkey bacon down in front of me.

“Sorry it’s basic,” he says. “Laurenz has spoiled me. I just went with what you had here and kept it simple.”

“It’s perfect.” I’m about to take a bite of my eggs, when my mother’s chiding voice demands that I say grace. “Never thought I’d say this, but I’m ready to go home. I miss Mama and Aunt G.”

“You talked to them?” He sets a plate down with mine on the counter and takes the stool beside me.

“Briefly. Mrs. Redmond says they’re good, but I want to see for myself.”

“Guess we part ways again.” He bumps his knee against mine. “I miss you already.”

“Two weeks in Tokyo and you’ll be back. I’ll actually be back *here* by then. Aunt Geneva will be recovered enough for me to come home.”

“You sound reluctant. Anything you want to talk about?”

“Not really.” I shrug. “Living with them has just shown me that this arrangement has an expiration date. Aunt G is seventy-seven years old. I can’t expect her to do this much longer. They both want it, but it’s not realistic. We’ll all have some tough decisions to make.”

“You’re right.” He links our hands on the counter between us. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“‘We,’ huh?” I tease.

“I want everything to be ‘we.’” He kisses my cheek.

A knock at the door interrupts us.

“That’s probably Skipper.” I rise and start for the door. “She’s bringing some stuff from the office before I fly back to Charlotte.”

“Oh, shit.”

I stop and turn to look at him. “What?”

“Bolt’s coming by to grab me for the airport.”

My eyes go wide. “What if they…”

I speed-walk to the door and wrench it open to find both of our assistants on the threshold, standing at least a foot apart, arms folded and eyes fixed straight ahead.

“Oh.” I gulp my down my laughter. “Skipper. Bolt. Good morning.”

“Speak for yourself,” Bolt grumbles, brushing past me and into the apartment. “I’m here for Mav.”

Skipper glances up, her gaze following Bolt’s departing back. I’ve never seen her look so forlorn.

I step out into the hall and close the door.

“What’s up, Skip?” I tilt my head toward the door. “You guys fucked in the elevator or something?”

She looks down at the floor, hands knotted at her waist.

“He asked me out on a date.”

My brows snap together. “And that’s bad?”

“Did you know he graduated from Harvard?” Her eyes go wide and slightly panicked. “Harvard, Hen. And he speaks like five languages.”

“Yeah, I think he actually serves as Mav’s translator in Japan.”

“You not helping!” she wails. “And he skis. Skis! What I’mma do with a skiing nigga?”

She huffs a sigh and looks up at the ceiling. “I bet he doesn’t even use the ‘N’ word, either. The only thing we have in common is orgasms. He’d get bored with me so fast, and I’m not putting myself out there just to get hurt.”

“Girl, you’re a college graduate yourself. You’ve achieved so much.”

“Not Harvard! And I’m the first from my family to even *go* to college. We East Point. His mother is a professor, and his father founded a school or something. And he’s flying all over the world. His boss is a billionaire.”

“Your boss ain’t exactly chopped liver,” I laugh.

“I know you’re a big deal.” She shakes her head. “I’m the one who’s not. Bolt’s going places.”

“So are you.” I lift her chin and capture her gaze. “And the first place you’re going is in this apartment and telling him you’ll go on that date. He’d be lucky to have you.”

“You think?” Skipper blinks at tears and bites her lip. “I feel like a punk being all intimidated by him.”

“Don’t be. You like him?”

“I really do. I think. I mean, we’ve spent more time smashing than talking.” She laughs and rolls her eyes. “But I think I do, yeah.”

“Well, give it a chance. I can’t promise that it’ll turn out like it has for me,” I say, swirling my hips. “But lemme tell ya. So far, so very good.”

We walk into the apartment laughing, but come to a stop when Bolt walks from the kitchen toward us, a determined set to his mouth. He takes Skipper by the elbow and keeps walking, guiding her out to the hall and slamming the door behind them.

Maverick stands at the entrance to the living room, brows lifted. “I told him to try again.”

“I told her the same thing.”

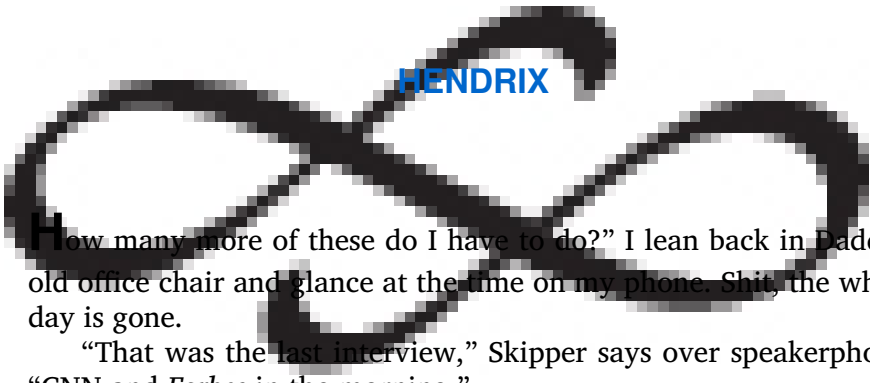
I cross over to him and step into his arms. “Think they’ll get arrested for public indecency out there?”

“If so, his ass is getting left here. I gotta get to Tokyo.”

I pout. “Don’t remind me. How is this gonna work, by the way? We’re in a long-distance relationship?”

He kisses my forehead and tightens his arms around me. “Another bridge we’ll cross when the time is right.”

CHAPTER 49



HENDRIX

"How many more of these do I have to do?" I lean back in Daddy's old office chair and glance at the time on my phone. Shit, the whole day is gone.

"That was the last interview," Skipper says over speakerphone. "CNN and *Forbes* in the morning."

"If I have to explain why this case is ridiculous and baseless one more time. Ugh. The fact that the judge completely ignored historical context—"

"Okay, champ. Save it for the cameras," Skipper says dryly. "Wind down and take a breather. We got a marathon ahead of us over the next few months."

The word "months" grates because instead of assisting the women who need help starting businesses, we're using our resources to defend ourselves against this idiocy, hands tied and unable to give away one red cent.

"You're right. I need to put today behind me so I'll be ready for tomorrow." I sniff the air. "I think the church meal train arrived. I smell something cheesy and gooey that'll sit on these hips."

"Your last week there, huh?"

"Yeah." I sigh. "Aunt G is getting around even better than the doctor anticipated. At her last checkup, he said she was healing well. I'll be back in the A getting on your nerves this time next week."

"Not at all." She pauses and then speaks in a rush. "Thanks again, by the way, for encouraging me to give Bolt a shot. When they get back from Tokyo, he's coming to Atlanta for our date."

“Niiiiiiiice. Happy for you.”

“Happy for you,” she counters playfully. “You and Mav are like dialed up to ten. You could barely keep your hands off each other. It was awkward.”

I bust out laughing and shake my head. “The way you found the audacity to say that to me when you literally fucked Bolt at a basketball game.”

“Will I never live that down?”

“Do you think I should let you?”

“Not actually, no,” she says, laughing.

Another call flashes up and I lean forward to peer at the screen on my desk. “Oh, it’s Kashawn. Gotta go.”

I end one call to pick up the other.

“Shawn, hey. What’s up?”

“You watching TV?

“Trying not to.” I walk toward the living room. “Why? What should I be watching?”

“Someone leaked the names of the businessmen funding CFE.”

“What?” I turn on the television. “Where?”

She tells me which station is reporting and I flip there as fast as I can.

The reporter is reading off a bunch of names I don’t recognize, but many of the companies they lead or are associated with I do.

“One very interesting note,” the reporter says, lifting her brows as she stares into the camera. “Andrew Carverson, owner of the Vegas Vipers, is reported to be one of the big donors. Tech mogul Maverick Bell is in the final phases of buying the Vipers.”

A photo of Maverick holding me on the courthouse steps appears on-screen. My heart is a kick drum in my chest and my breath suspends while I wait for these pieces to fit together.

“Speculation about his romantic relationship with one of the Aspire Fund defendants, Hendrix Barry, began when he was seen here with her.”

“Shit,” I mutter, forgetting Kashawn is even on the phone until she speaks.

“What’s up with Mav and Carverson?” she demands. “Did Mav know about this? Buying that team basically puts money in this man’s pockets. Why would he—”

“I don’t know, Shawn,” I say, squeezing the bridge of my nose. “This is the first I’ve heard of it, too. I’ll get to the bottom of it, but

that deal is important to Mav. He's been planning it for years, owning this team."

"More important than you?" Kashawn asks. "Because Mav's about to give one of the men trying to shut us down a shit ton of cash."

I close my eyes and pull the phone away from my ear, pressing it to my chest for a moment. "I'll find out what's going on."

"Get back to me as soon as you can."

After we disconnect, I dial Maverick right away. It's six o'clock in the evening here, so really early there, but I need to talk to him immediately. It goes to voicemail, and I growl my frustration while I wait to leave a message.

"Mav, what the hell is going on with you and this Vipers team owner?" I ask, hearing the snap in my voice. It sounds like anger, but it's confusion. Hurt. "Did you know about his involvement with Citizens for Equality? Kashawn is asking me and I feel like…"

A fool.

I feel like a fool for not knowing about Maverick's proximity to one of the men who has made it his twisted mission to tear down my organization. To tear down Black women. Maverick is days away from this sale going through, and I know he's been working toward this for so long, not just for him, but for his father. Going through with it, though, funds my opposition.

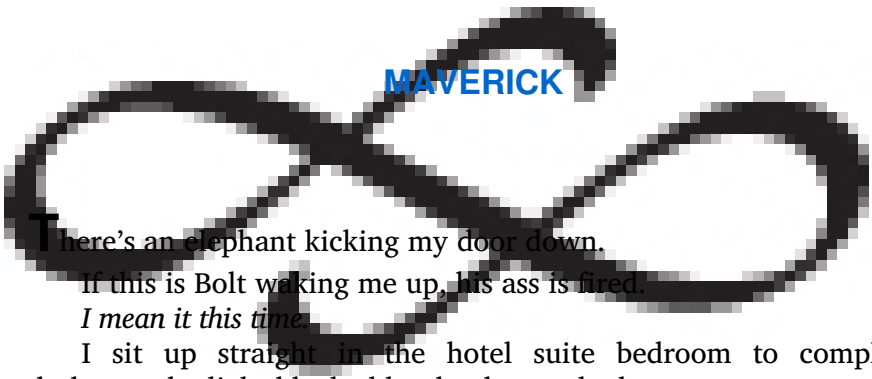
Would he choose me over his greatest ambition? His crowning achievement?

In my experience with men, especially powerful men, no.

In my experience with *this* powerful man… I wish I could say for sure. I steel my voice and brace my heart and finally force out the words.

"Just call me when you get this."

CHAPTER 50



MAVERICK

There's an elephant kicking my door down.

If this is Bolt waking me up, his ass is fired.

I mean it this time.

I sit up straight in the hotel suite bedroom to complete darkness, the light blocked by the drawn shades.

"Come in," I shout, pressing my palms into my eyes. "Shit."

"I would," Bolt yells back, "but it's locked."

I toss the covers aside and drag my tired body out of bed to yank open the door. He's standing there holding a cup of coffee like I'm not three seconds away from kicking his ass.

"I distinctly remember saying late last night"—I turn back into the bedroom, leaving him to follow—"emphasis on 'late' because we'd been in meetings all day and half the night—that I needed to sleep past eight this morning. Local time, please?"

"It's seven thirty," Bolt replies dispassionately. "And you need to check your phone."

I stride… or try to find my stride… back into the bedroom and grab my phone from the nightstand drawer.

"What's up? What'd I miss?" I ask around a yawn as Bolt presses the button on the wall to retract the shades covering the giant windows.

"Someone leaked the list of businesses backing CFE's lawsuit against Aspire," he says.

All lassitude evaporates and my narrowed eyes snap to his. "Who?"

The one word rolls out low and fierce, and even to my own ears

it matches the ferocious rage directed at these people targeting Hendrix.

"The list is extensive." Bolt walks farther into the room and leans against the wall. "But one name in particular stood out. Andrew Carverson."

The shock is so great the impact is delayed. The two parts of my life that have consumed the last few months—my relationship with Hendrix and my pursuit of the Vipers—clash like Big Bang meteors, exploding into white-hot rage.

The weight of this conundrum drops on me like a double-wide trailer. When I close this deal, the one I've been working on for years and dreaming about half my life, I'll inadvertently fund the very man trying to dismantle not only Hendrix's fund, but equity efforts at large.

"I can't just give up on the team," I say as much to myself as Bolt. "And I can't let Andy get away with this."

"What do you want to do?"

I want to tear Andy and the group of cowards who tried to hide behind the CFE smoke screen apart, to devastate them financially. Figure out a way to take every opportunity from them so they can see how it feels. The most urgent matter at hand, though, is stopping them from destroying Aspire's grant program.

I grab my phone and dial Andy's cell.

He never answers on the first ring, or even the second. He likes to make me wait. It's been one of the few ways he's still able to exert any control over me.

"Maverick," he says after the third ring, his voice pleasant and unsuspecting. "How are you?"

"I hear you're one of the people funding Citizens for Equality in their suit against the Aspire Fund. That true, Andy?"

The line goes quiet, and the longer the silence stretches, the higher the tension builds.

"I'm a concerned American who wants to see our nation's values restored and true fairness upheld by the law," he finally replies. "People should work for what they get, and if you're concerned about unfair advantages, so are we."

"Unfair advantages?" I scoff. "You, of all people, have the audacity to talk to me about unfair advantages. Are you kidding me?"

"We can agree to disagree, but don't let that ruin a deal that

gives us both what we want. Setting sentiment aside, this is business. I didn't expect it to have any bearing on our arrangement."

"It has bearing," I grit out. "Because you and your bigot friends are trying to dismantle the very laws my ancestors sacrificed for. That's more than 'sentiment,' and if you're so proud of it, why hide behind a firewall of secrecy? Why don't you 'concerned Americans' want people to know you're supporting the efforts to restore these values you're always talking about?"

"I still don't see—"

"It has bearing because I'm in a relationship with Hendrix Barry."

"Well, seems you have to decide which is more important to you," he says, the conciliatory tone he was faking dropping altogether, replaced by the kind of arrogance that comes with true privilege. "It's either your girlfriend's little fund or the team your daddy never got to coach. Decisions, decisions."

I let his taunts needle me, let them burrow under my skin and sting like a scorpion bite. I commit the note of smug self-satisfaction in his voice to memory. I want to recall it perfectly when I destroy him.

"By the time you fully grasp the mistake you just made, Andy, it'll be too late," I say and I hang up the phone.

"We still gathering intel on CFE?" I ask Bolt, who sits on the couch in the front room, arms spread behind him.

"Of course. We don't have much useful info yet," he says. "But we'll keep digging."

I glance at my phone and note a missed call from Hendrix. "Get an update for me while I call my girl back?"

"You got it." He stands, straightening his ever-present bow tie, black and yellow today. "I'm sure she has questions."

Questions. Concerns. Second thoughts?

I go to the bedroom to listen to her voice mail. Frustration and doubt seem to thread between her words. It took long enough to get her to trust me, to choose me, and now this bullshit happens. I think through what I'll say while I wait for her to pick up when I call.

"Mav, hey." The wall isn't completely back up, but the open honesty, the hard-earned intimacy has been replaced by wariness. I feel it right away.

“Do you trust me?” I ask instead of trying to convince her I didn’t know about this, but will do everything in my power to protect her.

Her pause, the hesitation before she answers, enrages me. Not anger at *her*, but at Andy Jr. and his bully buddies for putting me in such a position when things were just going right with Hendrix.

“I don’t know what to think, Mav,” she finally says. “Not that you have anything to do with it or that you were hiding it, but you’re in business with one of the men trying to destroy something I care so much about.”

“More than I care about you, is what you mean, right?”

“Well, we haven’t been together long and you’ve been pursuing this team literally for years. I’ve met your father. I know what he was denied his entire career. I know he’s still grieving your mom and the impact you’re hoping acquiring this team will have on him. I’m taking all of that into account.”

“And what I feel for you? Do you take that into account?”

“Look, I wouldn’t blame you for choosing the team. It wouldn’t surprise me. Hell, on some level maybe I’d even understand.”

“It wouldn’t surprise you?” I give my irritation free rein. “Setting aside the fact that you think I would choose a business venture over you—”

“A business venture,” she scoffs. “Don’t reduce it to that. We both know to you it’s more than that.”

“Setting that aside,” I persist. “I’m offended that you think I’d endorse or enable something that could have such egregious consequences for Black people, for equity.”

“Seriously?” She sucks her teeth. “Rich Black folks choose their own interests over the community’s all the time.”

“I’m just some rich dude to you?” I ask softly. “Just like every other man who has looked out for his needs and forgotten his girl’s?”

“You said it. I didn’t.”

“Hendrix, baby.”

She lets out a long frustrated breath. “Look, I know you’re in a difficult position.”

Is she really not going to ask me to choose her? My resolve strengthens, but all the words I had prepared to convince her recede.

“I’ll be in touch,” I tell her instead. “The next time we talk, this

will be settled."

"You're not going to… well, tell me what you plan to do?" she asks, allowing a rare vulnerability in her voice.

"I'll show you."

"Goodbye, Mav." The joy and eagerness usually in her voice when we speak is noticeably absent, flattened by worry and frustration.

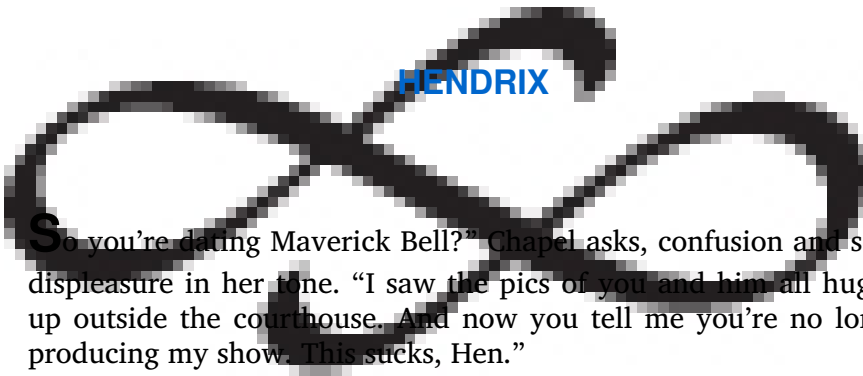
"Goodbye, Gorgeous."

I hang up, take a deep breath, and process what I'm about to do. It goes against every business instinct I have. The Vipers are an excellent investment. It's an industry I know inside and out and what I've wanted to do for as long as I can remember. And I truly believe it would invigorate my father in his grief like nothing else could, but this conundrum is not really a conundrum at all because of what I know in my heart. Something I haven't voiced to Hendrix yet, but will not miss the chance to show her.

"Let me guess," Bolt says. "We're heading home."

"You know me well." I sigh and scrub rough hands over my face. "But first I gotta make a call."

CHAPTER 51



HENDRIX

So you're dating Maverick Bell?" Chapel asks, confusion and some displeasure in her tone. "I saw the pics of you and him all hugged up outside the courthouse. And now you tell me you're no longer producing my show. This sucks, Hen."

Who you telling?

I want to say it so badly, but show restraint and comport myself like the good professional I am.

"My first concern is as your manager," I reply, tilting Daddy's rickety chair back and trying to maintain my Zen. "And ensuring that the best opportunities are available to you so we can grow your brand. That's my priority and my commitment."

"You feeding me the company line, but you forget I know how bad you wanted to break into producing with this show. You sure Maverick is worth losing this shot?"

Two days ago, I would have answered with an unequivocal *hell yeah*. After discovering the owner of the Vipers is one of the assholes behind this lawsuit and that Maverick is in business with him…

Do you trust me?

Maverick's question has been looping in my head ever since we spoke two days ago. We actually *haven't* spoken since. I'm still grappling with that question for myself. I'm certainly not unpacking it for Chapel. Not yet.

"Zere and I discussed this," I say, sitting forward and evading her question. "We've agreed it's better for all concerned if I step away from this project."

“Because she thinks you stole her man.”

I really wish Chapel was not so *read between the lines* literate.

“The situation between Zere and me—”

“And Maverick.”

“—has evolved and the smoothest road forward is with me operating in my capacity solely as your manager, and Zere taking the lead alone to helm the show.”

“And you’re sure you’re okay with this?” Chapel presses. “I don’t have to do it. You’re my manager, yes, but you’re also my girl and I—”

“Chap!” I close my eyes and take a beat to pull myself back from the edge. “Of course I’m disappointed that it’s not going as originally planned, but I want this show to have the best shot possible. That won’t happen if there’s tension between the two people trying to get it made.”

“If you don’t want me to do this, I won’t. We’ll do something else later.”

Look at her choosing me. The women in my life are constantly putting each other first. The men… jury’s still out.

“I want you to do the show, Chapel.” I kick off my shoes and wiggle my toes under the desk. “And I’m fine with this change since it’s what Zere needs to feel comfortable moving forward.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I am.” I sigh, ready to shift gears. “Now aren’t you going live with that beauty brand in like ten minutes?”

“S’posed to be.”

“Well, get on then.”

“Okay. I’ll get on then.” She laughs. “Love you, Hen.”

“Love you, too, Chap.”

I disconnect and flop back into Daddy’s chair.

“Tired?” Aunt Geneva asks from the office door.

I sigh and kick my feet up onto the desk with its chipped wood and wobbly leg that has somehow become beloved over the last few weeks.

“It’s been a long one.” I loosen the band securing my braids and let them fall down my back. “Feels like I’ve been on the phone with clients all day and I’ve had three interviews with news outlets about the lawsuit. I’m just… yeah. Tired.”

“Dinner’ll be ready in a bit. Just waiting for the fish to finish cooking.”

“Why are you making dinner? What about the church meal train?”

“Girl, I told them to stop bringing food. I can cook for us. I’ll be officially cleared soon to resume all normal activities, but I’m getting around so good now. Doctor says I have the body of a seventy-year-old,” she says, tongue in cheek. “Considering I’m seventy-seven, I’ll take it.”

I laugh and rise, crossing over to squeeze my aunt tight.

“We need to talk about next steps for Mama,” I whisper, squeezing harder when she stiffens. “Now don’t go all rigid on me.”

“We’re fine, Hen.” She pulls back to look at me. “I’ve got this.”

“You shouldn’t have to have all of it. Like you said, you’re seventy-seven years old. I know you’re in excellent shape and appreciate the sacrifices you’ve made, but it’s going to be too much. In some ways, I think it might already be.”

Her nod and the look on her face scream reluctant compliance.

“My name needs to be on everything, Aunt G, right along with yours. That’s medically, legally, custodially—whatever.”

“That makes sense.” She leans heavily into me, and I’m not sure if it’s how taxing the surgery has been on her body, or the emotional weight managing everything has become, maybe even if she didn’t recognize it. Aunt Geneva sniffs and grips me tighter. We stay that way for a few seconds while her tears soak my shirt.

“She’s my baby sister,” Aunt Geneva cries. “I’ve been so mad at God for letting this happen. You think I’m in my devotional every day praising Him, and yeah. There’s some of that, but we been in that room wrestling, me and God. I been asking Him hard questions and not always sure I can live with the answers.”

She pulls back and cups my face, now wet with tears to match hers. “But we have no choice, do we?”

“How do you do it day in and day out, Aunt G?” I ask. “I feel so unsure and inadequate most of the time.”

“He’s my very present help,” she says, and it sounds like a script she learned and continues to recite.

Faith has always seemed to come easily to Mama and Aunt Geneva, and to their mother before them. They passed it onto me like a wedding dress every woman in our family eventually wore. Once it got to me, though, it needed to be let out or taken in. Something about the way it lay against my beliefs and rationales never quite fit. I’ve often wondered how I can make this garment

that has always brought them so much peace, mine. When I'm more helpless and confused than I've ever felt, could it ever suit me? Could it help me?

"Tell me the real answer," I press. "How do you trust God when this kind of shit happens?"

Aunt Geneva doesn't even blink at the imprecation in what has been, for all intents and purposes, a cuss-free zone my entire life.

"I love Him," she says simply. "And I believe that He loves me and is working all things out for my good. That's not always what's easiest. Can you truly love someone you don't trust? I don't think so."

Do I love Maverick? It's the first time I've asked the question this directly of myself. Attraction. Companionship. Commitment, even. But love? That is a word reserved for people who prove they deserve it, and no man has proven it adequately to get that word from me.

But if anyone's ever stood a chance, it's Maverick Bell.

My phone vibrates on the desk with a text message, and I crane my neck to see it's in my thread with Kashawn and Nelly. I kiss the top of Aunt Geneva's head and release her.

"Let me see what these girls want, Aunt G."

"I'mma go finish dinner," she says.

I flop into the office chair and grab the phone.

Nelly: Looks like your boy showed us whose side he's on.

Kashawn: It doesn't make all our problems go away, but it's nice to see he's got your back, Hen.

Me: What are you talking about???

Nelly sends a link and I click it, eager, but also apprehensive to see.

Tech mogul withdraws offer for Vegas Vipers, citing owner Andrew Carverson's involvement with Aspire Fund lawsuit.

The article also indicates that the "whistleblower" who exposed the businessmen funding CFE's suit against us is actually Andrew Carverson's daughter, who leaked private documents stored at his home. The piece goes on to detail Maverick's announcement

minutes ago that he would no longer be purchasing the Vipers, a team he has recently been vocal about buying.

"I know it sounds funny coming from someone who has a lot of money," the article quotes Maverick. "But money isn't everything. Not when corrupt individuals are out here trying to roll the years back to a time when people who looked like me had fewer opportunities. How could anyone I love trust me if I set that aside to do business with someone now using legislation designed to protect us to set us back? How could I trust myself?"

How could anyone I love trust me…

Love. Love. Love.

The word reverberates through the chambers of my heart, echoing and piercing the tender flesh of my emotions.

Maverick did it. He really did it.

He is making this sacrifice for our community, yes. For Aspire, yes. But for *me*. I know it on a cellular level where my skin vibrates, anticipating his touch again. I don't have an outlet for this emotion running rampant through me right now. I have to tell someone the good news.

I *know* him. I trust him.

Shit, I love him.

And he chose me.

"Aunt G!" I shout, rushing out of the office and down the hall to the kitchen. "Guess what…"

I don't finish the words because a gargantuan arrangement of champagne roses dominates the kitchen counter. There must be fifty of them in one vase. Not sure if that math can even be mathing right, but the smell of those roses, the beauty of them—the significance of them—takes my breath away.

"Oh, God!" I cover my mouth and turn wide eyes on my mother and aunt, who watch me with smiles on their faces. I pluck one of the roses from the vase and lift it to my nose. "He sent these?"

"No," Mama says, nodding her head toward the living room. "Delivered them himself."

"Delivered them…" My poor overworked, overstimulated brain can't keep up. "You mean he… he's…"

"Go get him." Aunt G winks conspiratorially. "You made that man wait long enough."

I turn on my heel and rush into the living room. Maverick faces the window, his back to me, long and powerful, the muscles flexing

under his T-shirt. When he turns, I run across the room, holding nothing back. I barrel into him probably before he even has time to process that it's me. The oomph of air that pushes out of him mists my cheek, and he tightens his arms around me.

"Hey, Gorgeous," he whispers in my ear, running his hands down my back to rest at the curve of my hips.

"Hey?" I gape at him, incredulous on so many levels. "You do what you did and just come in here saying hey? Is that all you have to say?"

"I told you I was going to show you, right?" He cups my face in two large hands, his thumbs brushing tenderly over my lips. "So do you see now?"

"I see." Tears streak my cheeks and I cover his hands at my face with my own. "You love me."

"Damn right I love you." He dips and captures my mouth in a kiss that searches my soul and squeezes my heart. Makes the blood sing in my veins like that wordless jazz tune we danced to on a yacht under a moonlit sky. I hear the words to the song now. They're *love* and *trust* and *right now* and *forever* and *always* and *enough*.

"What about your dad?" I ask, when my lungs are so air-starved we have to break the kiss.

"He was the one who told me do it. Well, I'd already decided, but I knew buying this team was almost as important to him as it was to me."

"I know this was hard." I caress his nape and knit my brows in concern. "What'd he say?"

"He said there is nothing and no one I would have chosen over your mother. If you feel that way about Hendrix, I'll kick your ass myself if you buy this team." He gives me a wry grin. "He does have a few inches on me and he's in great shape for an old man."

"And you do feel that way about me?" I ask, breathless and undone by the force of such a man putting me first this way.

"I already told you I love you. Now you just fishing." He chuckles. "But if there is any doubt, yes. I feel that way about you. Nothing is more important."

"I love you too," I say, pressing a kiss to his lips. "And maybe just as important, at least to me, I trust you."

The laughter fades in his eyes, on his lips. "That means as much to me too. Thank you. And I'll never take either for granted."

“As much as I love that you chose me, it bothers me so badly that Carverson gets what he wants, gets to walk away unscathed.”

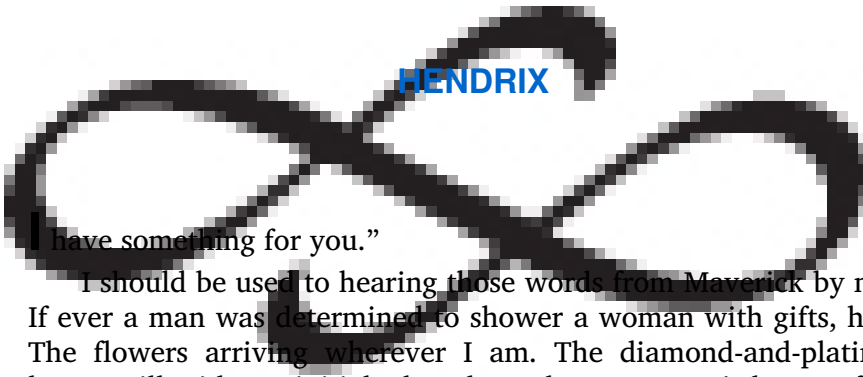
“Unscathed?” Maverick’s mouth hardens, firms into a line I would never want to cross.

“He won’t be. Not by the time I’m done with him.”

“You have a plan?” I ask, hoping that we win our case, but also hoping, as petty as it sounds, that the man who robbed Maverick of this dream suffers for it.

“Oh, I always have a plan.” He plucks the rose I didn’t even realize I was still holding from my fingers. “How do you think I got you?”

CHAPTER 52



HENDRIX

"I have something for you."

I should be used to hearing those words from Maverick by now. If ever a man was determined to shower a woman with gifts, he is. The flowers arriving wherever I am. The diamond-and-platinum lower grill with my initials that showed up at Mama's house after I casually mentioned I liked one Beyoncé was rocking. I've taken care of myself and others for so long, I almost forgot how it feels for someone else to want to take care of me.

Or as an adult… have I ever really known?

Because sometimes it feels like new emotions were invented for this thing that has blossomed between the two of us. I'm not sure how to name it, and it's articulated only in the pace of my heart when I think of him. In the hitch of my breath when I first see him. In the thrum of *home, home, home* beneath every second we're together. Of course, we've said we love each other, but that feels inadequate. Almost cliché. I've heard it used so often in the past, but the depth, the care that is developing in our relationship, I've rarely seen. Never experienced firsthand.

"What do you have for me?" I ask, resting my bottom on the edge of Daddy's old desk. We've still been working out of Mama's house for the last week, but Maverick leaves today and I'm heading back to Atlanta next week. Aunt Geneva's doctor gave her the official all clear a few days ago.

"A gift." He scoots the office chair closer and pulls me from my perch on the desk down to his lap. "But you don't have to accept it."

I lean into his neck, breathing in the clean smell of him, and chuckle.

"When have I ever turned down a gift?"

"This one carries some responsibility," he says, pulling back to peer into my face. "For real. If you decide you don't want this, I'll find another home for it."

"It needs a *home*?" My brows draw together, but my smile stays fixed in place. "I think you're taking 'diamonds are a girl's best friend' too literally."

"Not diamonds this time." He laughs, reaching down to caress the unicorn ankle bracelet I can't seem to make myself remove even if I'm lounging at home in cutoffs and a ratty T-shirt. "You want to see?"

I link our fingers on his chest and nod. "Gimme."

"Okay." He leans forward and grabs his phone, typing out a text. "It's outside."

"It's outside?" I slide off his lap and stand. "You better not have gotten me a car, Mav."

"Oh, you'd turn down a Bentley?"

"Hell, no." I toss my head back and laugh. "You know I wouldn't."

"Well, this is not that." He takes my hand and leads me out of the office and up the hall. "It's even better. I mean, if you want to keep it."

"Why do you keep thinking I won't want to keep it?"

Before he can answer, a sharp bark pierces the air. I stop, keeping his hand and pulling him up short. He grins over his shoulder at me.

"You didn't," I gasp, not sure how I feel about what that bark portends.

"Remember." He steps close and kisses my forehead. "You don't have to keep her."

"Her?"

I walk around him and rush ahead. A guy holding a tiny dog stands in the living room beside a grinning Aunt Geneva.

"Mr. Bell," he says, stroking the dog's head. "Got your message to come on in."

"Thank you." Maverick walks over and takes the little dog into his arms.

"He's the cutest thing," Aunt Geneva purrs, looking lovesick

already.

"She," Maverick and I correct in unison.

Maverick walks closer, not making any move to hand over the Yorkshire terrier.

"You did once tell me a dog would be the closest you'd come to a maternal instinct," he teases, but watches me closely with lifted brows. "What do you think?"

"I'm not sure yet." I reach out a tentative hand and rub her silky head. The fur is trimmed short, a rich caramel color streaked with dark chocolate. She peers at me over Maverick's arm, giving me a look that must epitomize what they mean by puppy-dog eyes. My heart turns to a glob and I reach for her.

"You're the prettiest girl," I coo, holding her loosely against my chest. Her little paws tap my arm over and over like she hears some rhythm in her head. "You playing the drums for me?"

I laugh when her light taps continue, accompanied by staccato yelps.

"My little drummer girl," I say with a laugh.

"Yours if you want," Maverick interjects. "She comes housebroken and with some basic training, but if you decide you don't want her—"

"I do." I bury my nose in her clean-smelling fur. "I want her. Thank you, Mav."

I kiss his cheek and blink away tears. Maverick has given me so many gifts, but this one, a tiny life I'm responsible for, moves me the most. It shows how well he knows me. I love taking care of people. My friends, my family. I have so much love to give, and it would be easy to assume that because I don't want children, I don't want the responsibility of caretaking. There's nothing further from the truth. The chance to be an auntie to Soledad's and Yasmen's kids is an honor I'm so grateful for. Being there for my friends however they need me—one of my greatest joys. And being free to devote so much time to take care of my mother in this final stretch of her journey—

I'd never abdicate that daughter's privilege. Maverick trusts me to choose *where* I pour my love instead of making the assumptions culture imposes on *who* should receive it. I've felt desired before. I've felt needed.

Now I know what it means to feel seen. To feel known.

Late that night, our bellies are full of Aunt Geneva's lasagna

and the laughter chimes through the whole house. My new pup's personality may be too big for such a tiny body. She bounds all over the place, her energy brightening the room like sunshine even after the sun sets.

"Thought of a name yet?" Maverick asks from beside me on the couch, his arm draped around my shoulders.

The puppy hops from one spot to the next, pounding on pillows and tapping anything she can reach with her paws.

"Don't laugh," I say, side glancing him. "Sheila E."

He snickers and shakes his head. "That's actually perfect and feels exactly like what you would name your dog."

"It's the drumming."

"Um, yeah." He chuckles and kisses the top of my head. "I got that."

"Want me to wrap up some of this lasagna to take with you, Mav?" Aunt Geneva asks from the living room door.

"No, I'll be fine," he says, smiling. "But thank you."

"All right," she says. "Well, I'mma turn in. Your mama's already asleep, Hen. Working out in that garden has been good for her. She's definitely been sleeping better lately."

"Agreed," I say. "Night, Aunt G."

Maverick stands, crosses over, and gives my aunt a quick hug. "Thank you for all your hospitality. I'll see you soon, I'm sure."

"I hope so." She glances at me, her look rueful and uncertain. "With Hendrix heading back to Atlanta next week, not sure when."

I keep my features neutral, but Aunt Geneva and I need to continue our discussion about things that need to change. One of them is living arrangements. I draw a breath, already bracing myself for that tough talk. Neither my mother nor my aunt will want to hear what I have to say, but it has to be said. It won't be easy, but after the scare we had, I think we at least have to consider it.

"You okay?" Maverick asks, settling back beside me on the couch once Aunt Geneva leaves.

"Of course." I shoot him a quick smile.

"You just looked…" He shrugs. "Kind of sad for a second there."

"Yeah." I sigh, forgetting how closely Maverick watches me, how in tune he can be to what I'm feeling. "Just some hard conversations we need to have about what's next."

"I figured as much."

I lay my palm against the hard, stubbled line of his jaw and smile. “That is not what I want to talk about in your last few minutes here.”

“I don’t want to go.” He leans forward and presses his forehead to mine. “Don’t want to leave you.”

“Come to the A when you’re done.”

“I will.” He frowns. “But first I want to hear what Kenan Ross and these guys he’s pulled together have to say.”

“These are all owners in the league?”

“Yeah. My team has been digging like gophers into Andy. Looking for anything we can use against him.”

“Anything surfaced?”

Taking Andy Carverson down won’t solve Aspire’s lawsuit problem, but watching him fall would give me the tiniest pop of petty joy in a dire situation.

“We’ve unearthed several former Vipers employees whose accusations of discrimination were shut down,” Maverick says. “Women who complained of sexual harassment were threatened, lost their jobs, were manipulated into silence. Black folks who left the company citing a hostile workplace. There’s something there, and I won’t stop looking until we’ve found all of it. And once we do…” A grim smile sketches lines around Maverick’s full lips. “Once we do, I’mma run his ass out the league and get my team not only cheaper than before, but without having to keep him on the board. Watch and see.”

“I believe you. I believe *in* you.”

I take his mouth in a kiss that burns so hot it incinerates the last of my doubts, and it tastes like hope and tenderness. It is sweet on my tongue. When his hand slips under my T-shirt to knead my breast, I bite my lip to suppress the moan making its way up my throat. Mama is a light sleeper, and I can’t count on whatever choir Aunt Geneva is ending the day with to drown out my screams. I pull away, both of us gasping with the quick-building passion that seems even more intense since we said we loved each other.

“You sure you don’t want to come back to the hotel with me tonight?” He pants into my neck, his fingers skimming my spine and making me shiver.

“I want to.” I breathe out a laugh and kiss along his jaw. “But I don’t have much time left here before I’m back in Atlanta. We’ll make up for it when you come next week.”

“I already miss you,” he whispers with a kiss.

“I didn’t think missing someone before they’re gone was a thing.” I wrap my arms around his waist and press close. “But you’ve proved me wrong.”

* * *

“You miss him already, too?” I ask Sheila E later that night out in the backyard with her while she does her business. She squats and blinks at me like I should look away and give her some privacy. “You probably don’t know him well enough yet to miss him, but you will.”

We step into the kitchen and I open the refrigerator, contemplating a late-night square of Aunt Geneva’s lasagna.

“It’s even better the next day.” I lift the foil from the pan slotted between other dishes. “And, yes, I know technically she just cooked it today, but you know what I mean.”

Sheila E settles into the bed I keep in here for her and falls into a light snooze. A muffled sound makes me pause reaching for a plate. I leave the kitchen, guided to the living room by the sound of soft footsteps and muttered speech. Mama paces in front of the living room window, every few seconds stopping to pull the curtain back.

“I told that man,” Mama mutters, the lapels of her robe gripped between her fingers as she walks a worn path in front of the window. “Old stubborn fool.”

Oh, please no.

My shoulders droop and my heart plummets. There is a part of me that wants to run and bring Aunt Geneva to handle this, for her to be the one who steps back in time to one of the most painful nights of our family’s history and bring Mama home.

But I’m here.

“Mama,” I say, keeping my voice low and even. “It’s late. Come on to bed.”

“Bed?” She whirls around, brows furrowed with worry, one of her rollers slipping from a curl. “I can’t. Your daddy still ain’t back. I told him not to go get me that ice cream.”

Her features soften into affection. “You know how he gets, though. He was determined I’d have that ice cream before bed. He’s

been gone for what seems like hours, though."

More and more, the present is becoming a foreign, fractured world of strangers. The past is familiar. The love of her life is there, alive and hale. Whole. Frozen in their best days. Is it selfish to keep trying to drag her back here? Are we the comfort? Or are we the ghosts? Having seen that fresh devastation in her eyes, I'll never tell her again. The truth is not the most important thing. Her peace is.

"He'll be back, Mama."

At my words, her frightened eyes do a slow slide from the empty street beyond the window and over to me. "He will?"

"Yes, ma'am." I approach and slip my elbow through the crook of hers. "I'm thinking while we wait, maybe we should watch a movie or something."

"A movie? We haven't done that in a long time." Her expression brightens, but she searches my face as if for confirmation. "Have we?"

"No, you're right. We haven't." I guide us into the living room and settle Mama on the couch.

Mama still has a DVD player because she always insisted she'd need it to play her favorite movies. I blow the dust off the technological relic and rummage through the basket of discs she always keeps close by until I find the one I'm looking for.

"*Sister Act*!" I grin triumphantly and hold up the tattered disc.

"Two?" Mama asks suspiciously.

"The first one is better," I say, smiling at our old argument. "You know that."

"But the second one has L. Boogie."

My seventy-five-year-old mother calling Lauryn Hill "L. Boogie" has me cackling, but I just nod and slip the disc in. As usual, when we reach Lauryn's solo, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," Mama hums along. We both do. As the credits roll, Mama turns to me, staring at my profile long enough that I'm forced to turn and meet her eyes.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"You see that poem right there?" She nods to the opposite wall where "Footprints" has hung for as long as I can remember. It's always been one of Mama's favorites.

"Of course." I shift to settle more comfortably against the cushions. "What about it?"

"You ever really read it?"

I glance from her to the wall, allowing my eyes to skim the

familiar stanzas. “Sure. I mean, not in a long time, but I know it. The person says they see two sets of footprints, but at the lowest times of their life, it’s just one set.”

“Right, and they ask God why He left when things were hardest.”

“Yeah, I know it almost by heart,” I say wryly.

“I read it now and think about it differently.” She swallows and fiddles with one of her Velcro rollers. “When I look at those disappearing footsteps now, I see us.”

“Us?” My brows pinch into a frown. “You and me?”

“I’m the one vanishing, Hen.” She breathes out shakily. “I’m scared of the day when my body is still here, but I’m gone for good. I mean in my mind, gone for good.”

“You are here.” I cup her jaw, urging her to look at me. “You’re here with me, Mama, and *I’m* gonna take care of you. You hear me?”

Silence greets my question, but after a few seconds, she nods, a single tear streaking down her cheek. I swipe it away with my thumb and pull her close.

“I’m not going anywhere, Mama. When those footsteps disappear, that’s *me* carrying you. I will *never* leave you alone or in the dark by yourself. Okay?”

She offers a shaky smile and leans into my arm, her head dropping to my shoulder. I force myself not to move, but sorrow and determination and gratitude and resentment and a thousand disparate emotions war inside me. While I choke back my own tears, Mama slides down until her head rests in my lap.

“John,” she whispers in a troubled sleep, a few of the rollers in her hair dislodging when she turns her head fitfully. “He home yet? I told him not to… didn’t need that ice cream.”

It’s astounding how obstinately her mind clings to certain things and lets the rest float away. I squeeze my eyes shut, but silent, hot tears scorch my face. That damn ice cream. That night is suffused with *could’ve been*s and *never should’ve*s, the hours that her mind circles over and over again searching for a different outcome. One where the love of her life is here. That night is a door that stays cracked open; one that deprived her of one last kiss. Of a final farewell. And in the fog of her memories, that door remains ajar.

He’d know. Daddy would know how to carry Mama in the lowest times when the footprints disappear. I silently promise him

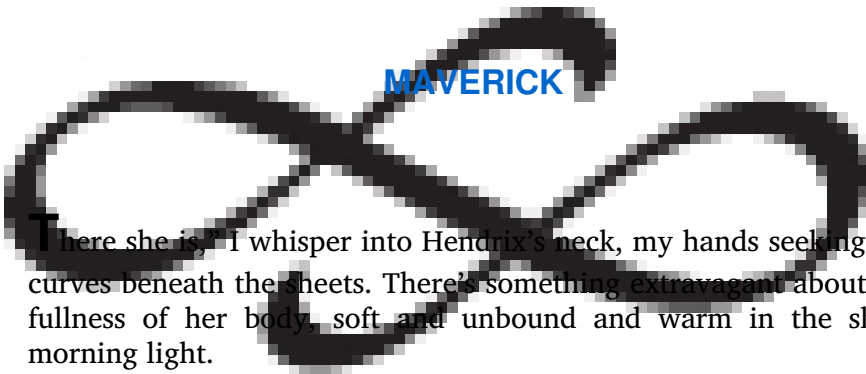
and myself that I'll do my best.

With the remote, I turn off the television and lie back, my mind and heart much wearier than my body despite the lateness of the hour. Between my fingers I rub the silk-pressed curls that have slipped free of Mama's Velcro rollers. I hold myself still while her breathing evens out. The frown pinching her brows smooths and I hope that sleep resets her mind and she can wake in the morning firmly planted in the day we are living.

My heart squeezes around the reality of my father really being gone. Of the people I've loved and lost. I don't blame Mama for slipping away sometimes, her mind taking refuge where it finds it. If I could escape to a place where they were still alive, I would. Sometimes I want to say *Take me with you* to this place where you can still hug Daddy, still sing hymns with Grammy, and freeze-frame the best times of our lives. I can't do that, but I can be a harbor when she comes back to this dimming present. I allow myself one last tear because it's not actually Maverick who is teaching me how it feels to miss someone before they're gone.

It's Mama.

CHAPTER 53



MAVERICK

There she is," I whisper into Hendrix's neck, my hands seeking her curves beneath the sheets. There's something extravagant about the fullness of her body, soft and unbound and warm in the sheer morning light.

"It's too early," she grumbles, rolling away from my touch to bury her face deeper into the pillow. "Keep them hands to yourself. I was up at the crack of dawn taking She-she out."

Over the last few months, Sheila E quickly evolved to She-she. That little dog has so much energy, Hendrix can barely keep up, but on some of the hard days when things with Hendrix's mom are tough or the case is frustrating, one bounding leap from She-she can chase the tension from my girl's face. Hendrix may complain about early-morning walks, but there is no doubt in my mind She-she is her favorite gift I've given her.

"Keep my hands to myself?" I laugh and pull her back flush to my chest. "Ain't no way. You should've thought of that before you told me you loved me. No take-backs."

"Can we at least wait until after eight in the morning before your hands start wandering?" she complains, but humor has entered her sleep-rasped voice and she sounds more alert.

"Eight?" I scoff. "It's like ten o'clock, Gorgeous."

"Shit." She sits up straight and slaps a hand over her forehead, dislodging the silk scarf covering her braids. "Why'd you let me sleep so late?"

"Because Skipper told me you didn't have appointments this morning, and you didn't come to bed till after one."

“Isn’t your body supposed to be on West Coast time?” She swings her legs over the side of the bed and considers me over one bare shoulder. The flimsy strap of her pajama top keeps drooping down and it makes me want to rip the whole thing off.

“I travel so much, my body is on whatever time zone I’m in,” I tell her, sliding across the bed to kiss the curve of her neck. “Besides, I’ve been here in Atlanta for two days. Doesn’t take long to adjust.”

“Thank you for coming.” She leans back and cups my neck, resting her head against mine. “I’m glad you’re here while I sort through all this stuff. I never thought we’d actually be selling Mama’s house, but here we are.”

“She doing okay?” I take advantage of her position and drag her back into bed.

“Mav,” she laughingly protests, but shuffles to sit beside me until both of our backs are pressed into the headboard. “She’s getting there. Having Aunt Geneva’s support helped. I mean, telling her it was time to leave that house was one of the toughest things I’ve ever had to do.”

Her expression sobers and she takes my hand, resting our linked fingers in her lap. “But it has to happen. Being there while Aunt Geneva recovered just showed me that the situation was no longer sustainable.”

“But now she’s selling the house. Moving, both her and Aunt G. I’m proud of you, baby. This is hard shit. I watched my mom negotiate it. You’re a good daughter.”

“God, I’m trying.” She whooshes out a long sigh. “I’m consulting with her doctor and getting advice from people in my support group who have relocated their loved ones. Some of them declined badly, and some of them did okay. It’s a risk, but I’m going to do everything I can to make this transition good for her. Or as good as it can be.”

“You know there are no guarantees, though, right?” I ask, gently caressing her thumb. “Moving is a huge disruption.”

“You think it’s the wrong thing to do?” she asks, anxious eyes finding mine.

“No, it’s not that. I just want you to be prepared for how hard it could be—the effect it could have. There is no easy solution in this.”

“We’re bringing all her stuff and I’m taking pictures of

everything so we can replicate her setup as much as possible. Make it familiar." She shrugs, worry tugging her brows together. "I know she didn't want to leave her home, but I'm hoping she'll love the new house I have here for us all."

"You got this, and anything you need, you know I'm here."

"You've done a lot," she says, leaning over to kiss my cheek. "Thanks for helping me find our new place. It's fantastic."

"I got the best Realtor money can buy, and I'm glad he could help." I shrug. "Not that he had to look too far. The house was right here in Skyland."

She beams and tightens her hand around mine. "Just a few blocks from Yasmen and Soledad. It's perfect for Mama and me and Aunt G."

"It's all coming together." I kiss the top of her head and pull her closer.

She looks up at me, her lips tipping to one side in a wry half grin. "Now if we could just get this shit with CFE settled. I swear they're dragging this out as long as possible. We've still got months before our case is even heard, and in the meantime we can't award any grants."

"I know, but we'll keep at it. And at least you're still working with your founders, helping Black women get their businesses off the ground in the venture space. We'll get the grants back online soon enough."

"What about you?" She pulls away far enough to study my face. "Any updates on Carverson?"

"We're chipping away at him." I suppress fresh anger at the thought of pulverizing Andrew. "A single employee coming forward to expose his misogynistic treatment of women is one thing, but several coming forward? And enough marginalized employees to establish a pattern of racist behavior, coupled with him trying to tear down an organization serving Black women? That shit don't look good."

"Public opinion has definitely started turning against him," Hendrix says. "So what's the next move?"

My phone flashes on the bedside table. I peer over to check the name displayed on the screen.

"Here's my next move now." I steal one last kiss before answering the phone. "Kenan, whassup?"

"Good news," Kenan Ross replies from the other end. "I met

with several owners today about the Carverson situation."

"And?" I ask, tensed waiting for his response.

"They're ready to file a formal complaint and pressure him to sell the team."

"Yes." I pump my fist and grit out a hard smile. "Think it'll work?"

"The owners, coupled with several prominent players like August West speaking out against him, yeah. A league of overwhelmingly Black players aren't standing for this bullshit vendetta Carverson's helping finance against a venture capital fund run by Black women for Black women."

"Good. We've been working the sponsor angle. I've got at least three of the Vipers' largest sponsors prepared to speak out this week and threaten to withdraw financial support if leadership doesn't demand Andrew step down and sells his shares."

"Think all this will be enough?" Kenan asks.

"Oh, hell yeah. By the end of the week, Andrew will be talking with his lawyers about putting the team up for sale. We've backed his ass into a corner like the rat he is."

"And when the team goes back on the market?" Kenan's grin comes across even through the phone. "Is your shit tight? You'll be ready to move back into position?"

My gaze tracks Hendrix moving around the bedroom opening the shades, braids spilling over her shoulders and down her back. Her deep chestnut skin glows as brightly as the sun streaming through the windows. Her smile flashes wide and white as She-she dances around her feet, begging for attention. I've never liked Andrew Jr., but he fucked up when messed with my girl. He has to pay for that.

"Back into position?" I shake my head, relishing how far that man will fall by the time I'm done with him. "I never moved."

Kenan chuckles, the anticipation evident in his voice. "This is gonna work. All the pieces are falling into place."

"Yup. Now we watch *him* fall."

When we disconnect, I leave the bedroom to seek out Hendrix. She's in the kitchen, whisking eggs and wearing a brightly colored silk robe pulled over her short pajamas.

"Everything good?" she asks, glancing up from the bowl to search my face.

I walk up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist.

“I have you, don’t I?” I whisper in her ear. “How could everything not be good?”

It’s only as the words leave my mouth that I realize how true they are. All my life I’ve been the guy who needed things lined up, tight, set in motion just so. I had goals and very little swayed or distracted me from them. I’m a chaser; always have been looking for the next goal, the next achievement, the next risk and high. I got it all, and somehow it still was never enough. Loving her, being with her—the only thing I can’t get enough of is this. Is us.

“Hey.” I put my hands over hers to still the whisking. “Look at me for a sec.”

She turns, leaning against the counter and linking her arms over my shoulders and around my neck.

“I’ll never finish breakfast if you start feeling me up and slapping my ass.”

I laugh, gripping her hips and giving her a little shake. “I promise to let you get back to my breakfast.”

“Don’t get used to it.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m not spoiling you.”

“That’s where we differ because I’m gonna spoil your ass rotten.”

The laughter fades in her expression. “You know I joke a lot about gifts and stuff, but I don’t need any of that. I just want you.”

“I know.” I run the back of my hand over the high curve of her cheekbone. “But I want to give you everything, Hen. You work hard. Let me make things soft for you.”

“Maybe a little then,” she says, smirking.

“It’s bad business to let the person on the other side of the negotiating table know they can have anything they want.” I gently cup her face and hold her eyes so she can read the absolute truth of what I’m saying. “But that’s what I want you to know. And I don’t just mean jewelry or gifts. I’m giving you my whole heart, Hendrix.”

Any lingering traces of humor disappear from her face and she links our hands, pressing them to her heart. Telling her this is one of the most vulnerable moments of my life. Loving someone this way feels like giving them a blank check and telling them they can fill it up with zeros. That there is no limit, but that’s how I feel when I’m with Hendrix.

“Mav, I…” She blinks at tears and swallows hard. “I’ve seen this before with other people. My parents and my friends, but I wasn’t

sure I'd ever find someone who accepted me just as I am and loved me no matter what. I'm not easy."

I lift her chin and meet her eyes.

"Falling in love with you is the easiest thing I've ever done," I tell her. "It happened before I even realized it. I just knew you were the most fascinating woman I'd ever met and I wanted to know you. I wanted us to be friends, and then I wanted us to be everything."

She presses our foreheads together and nods, a few tears slipping past her closed eyelids. I brush away her tears with my thumbs. We have hard days ahead. The shit with the Vipers. Aspire's legal issues. The long inevitability of her mother's journey with Alzheimer's. Not to mention a bicoastal relationship. If we thought us getting together was complicated, we ain't seen nothing yet. *Staying* together will hold new challenges, but that unassailable joy I saw in Hendrix out on that dance floor the night we met tells me there is no one I'd rather face hard times with. The world can take its best shots. My girl's a fighter, and when she's knocked down she gets back up. I want to stand with her in her convictions. I want to hold her when grief or sorrow knocks at her door. I want to dance with her when life serves up celebrations.

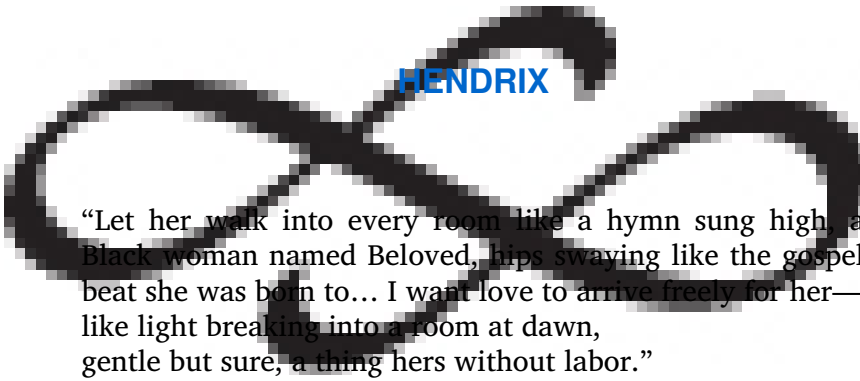
I wasn't looking for this—what we have, what we're building—because I didn't know it was possible. Not for me, but this woman had me looking, had me searching, had me chasing.

I caught her.

She caught me.

And now, thank God, there's no letting go.

EPILOGUE



HENDRIX

"Let her walk into every room like a hymn sung high, a Black woman named Beloved, hips swaying like the gospel beat she was born to… I want love to arrive freely for her—
like light breaking into a room at dawn,
gentle but sure, a thing hers without labor."
—Frederick T. Joseph, "A Black Woman Named Beloved"

This night has been a long time coming."

My words feel like such an understatement as I look out over the crowd assembled in Sky Park and gesture to the large screen set up behind me.

"I'm so excited to share an early screening of this new television show with our friends and family right here in Skyland before it airs on network TV in a few days."

I pause for the crowd's applause before going on.

"Many of you know its star from her online videos. You've seen her charisma, infectious spirit, and ability to do just about anything," I say. "It's what drew millions to her, but it's her heart that makes them stay."

I stretch my hand and invite my client, my dear friend, to join me on the stage.

"Please welcome the woman of the hour to introduce the premiere of her new television show *Home Is Where the Start Is*, Soledad Charles!"

By the time Soledad crosses the stage to me, her face is tear-streaked and wreathed in so much joy that I'm blinking back thug

tears my damn self. She doesn't say a word, but walks right into my arms. Holding each other only makes us both cry a little harder. She finally pulls back and smiles up at me.

"Thank you, Hen," she says into the mic. "When I say I wouldn't be here tonight if it weren't for Hendrix, I mean that. When I had no money, she and my friend Yasmen made sure me and my girls didn't go without."

Soledad blinks away more tears, gulps until she finds her composure.

"Hen helped me carve out a new path as an influencer. She took me on as a client and believed in me when I had to figure out how to believe in myself. So yeah. I wouldn't be here without her."

Soledad shields her eyes against the bright lights and peers out at the crowd.

"And where is Yasmen Wade? Yas, I know you're running around planning or fixing something. She helped organize this event for us tonight. It doesn't feel right to be up here without you."

Looking slightly frazzled, Yasmen speed-walks through the crowd and up to the stage. She takes the spot on the other side of Soledad and slips an arm through hers. Soledad looks from me to Yasmen, and tears fill her eyes all over again.

"I have an amazing partner," she says. "Judah Cross, you know I love you and am so glad we get to do this life thing together."

I search the crowd to find Judah sitting on the front row with his boys Aaron and Adam. The look in his eyes, the smile on his face is so full of love and pride. Soledad's three girls are seated with them, and their faces are alight with the same emotion. The same love.

"Yasmen has her ex-ex-husband Josiah," Soledad says, a teasing grin curving her lips. "We were all waiting for those crazy kids to get back together."

Yasmen rolls her eyes, but smiles good-naturedly and blows a kiss to Josiah, who sits with Deja and Kassim.

"And now Hendrix has a partner, too." Soledad's eyes soften when she looks back to me. "Maverick, welcome to our chaos."

Mav, who's seated on the same row as Josiah and Judah, drapes one arm over the shoulder of his daughter, Tamia. When my gaze locks with Maverick's, there's a tender heat, a deep knowing that I've only ever felt when I looked into this man's eyes.

"My point," Soledad continues, "is that all three of us have

partners, men we love."

A few more tears trickle over her cheeks. "But these two women are just as much my soulmates. They have been with me through the toughest times of my life. They have never wavered and have taught me what true friendship, what real sisterhood means. I thank you."

We're all a mess now, the tears falling faster than we can wipe them. We've all been on our individual journeys, experienced hardships, but not one step since we met each other has been taken alone.

"If I don't play this first episode," Soledad laughs, swiping at her cheeks, "we'll never get through this. When the network approached me about doing a show that emphasized the beauty of creating a home, I knew this was the right fit. I dedicate this premier episode to my girls and to my guys."

She smiles at her daughters, Judah, and his boys. "And to you, Skyland, for being our family and our community. For being our home."

We leave the stage and I settle gratefully into the seat beside Maverick. He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles once the episode begins playing.

"Proud of you, Gorgeous," he whispers.

"Me?" I shrug and keep my voice low under the show's opening credits. "It's Soledad's night."

"It is, but she said it herself. None of this would be happening without you." Affection fills his eyes in the dim light from the screen and the moon overhead. "I know you said once it's not Black Girl Magic, but *you* are magic, Hendrix Barry. And I'm more than happy if this is a spell you cast on me."

I fight back the smile threatening to overtake my face and punch him lightly on the arm. "Boy, hush. You have me. You ain't gotta lay it on that thick."

"Oh, my God!" Tamia hisses, aiming an indignant look our way. "Will you two please just watch the show?"

She reminds me so much of Deja and Lupe, always hushing me and Soledad and Yasmen, acting embarrassed by us. Just generally being teenagers. Over the last year I've gotten to know Maverick's daughter and she's a remarkable young woman. I'd expect no less from someone raised by the man who has absolutely stolen my heart.

“Sorry!” I grin over at her. “We’ll keep it down.”

I make a conscious effort to focus on the show, but I’ve seen the episode so many times. As an executive producer, I’ve been involved every step of the way. Turns out I didn’t have to sacrifice my relationship with Maverick to break into television. Neither did I have to depend on Maverick’s money or name. I did it myself, helping Soledad cultivate and refine her raw talent and parlaying it into this opportunity. We did it, and I think it was supposed to happen this way all along. Oh, Chapel’s show is on the air. Zere followed through on that promise, and it’s doing well, but that wasn’t my destiny. I had two paths in front of me. One led to an opportunity I could recreate for myself, but denied me Maverick. The other led to the only man who has ever made me feel safe and secure and adored and respected and seen.

I chose right.

When the show is over, everyone eats from the tables set up all over the park loaded with the Grits catering menu. Soledad sparkles on camera as local news stations interview her and capture her reactions. I stand a few feet off, close enough in case she needs me.

“You happy?” Maverick asks from beside me, tangling our fingers. “With the show, I mean?”

“Yeah.” I smile at my girl getting all the light she deserves. “This is the first of many opportunities. She’s ready for them all.”

“Hendrix!” a reporter calls, walking over to join us with mic in hand. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” I don’t need the spotlight, but I’m always ready.

“Can you share what’s going on with Aspire’s legal troubles?” the reporter demands, thrusting the mic toward me.

I lift my brows, surprised by the direction of the question, but not unprepared.

“CFE has done everything in its power to delay our day in court,” I say. “Meanwhile, there are Black women who could be receiving grants to assist with their businesses. These grants are modest, but they can make a huge difference to the folks who need them.”

“But you’re still running the venture capital fund?” the reporter clarifies.

“Oh, yeah. With Hue we are headed toward our first unicorn. We’re proud of CannaDo, a female-led company pioneering innovative methods for dispensation of legalized cannabis. We’re

still going strong on that front, but I cannot emphasize how important this case is. If they defeat us, they set precedent for other grant-based equity efforts. Dismantling affirmative action was just the beginning. They'll be coming for other programs designed to shrink the wealth and education gaps created by historically racist structures in this country."

"And what about you, Mr. Bell?" The reporter shifts her mic and her scrutiny to Maverick. "There was quite a bit of controversy when you withdrew your bid to buy the Vipers, but then Andrew Carverson was ousted, pressured to step down and sell the team. You swooped right back in and bought the controlling shares. Any updates?"

"Update is that we're going for a ring this year," Maverick replies with an easy smile and an arm around my waist. "We've had a lot of distractions with the transfer of ownership, but the team remains focused on winning. Coach has asked my father to serve as an adviser, which feels right since he devoted so much of his career to the Vipers. So I think all is well as we gear up for the new season. A winning season."

"And did you hear the news about Zere?" There is a glint in the reporter's eye as she looks between us, searching our faces for a reaction Maverick and I are both seasoned enough not to give her.

"No, sorry." Maverick keeps his expression pleasantly indifferent. "Haven't heard."

"She and her fiancé, Charles Filmore, are expecting their first child," the reporter offers, her sharp gaze pinging between Maverick and me.

I gasp, pleasure winning out over playing it cool.

"That's amazing," I say, my smile genuine. "I'm so happy for her, for them."

"Yeah," Maverick agrees, his grin sketching faint lines around his eyes and mouth. "I hadn't heard, but that's fantastic. I wish them only the best."

The reporter looks slightly disappointed by all the goodwill and nods before thanking us and walking off to find the next story.

"I'm truly happy for Zere," I say, dropping my head to Maverick's shoulder. "I know how badly she wanted a baby."

"You can tell her yourself next week in New York when Chapel is doing promo for her show. I hope this heals the last of whatever tension might exist."

“I think it will. I’ve had some contact with her during the first season of Chapel’s show, and we were amicable. Hopefully this can move us into warm and friendly.”

“Speaking of move.” Maverick dips to whisper in my ear. “When can we leave? I’d like you to myself for a little bit.”

Tamia walks up beside us, biting into a collard green quesadilla.

“Are you guys being all in love again?” She teases us about not being able to keep our hands off each other, but I know she’s glad to see her father happy.

“Oooh, I want some,” I tell her. “Those collard quesadillas are my fave.”

“Get your own.” Tamia shifts the food away from me and laughs. “Dad, I’m gonna head back to the hotel if that’s okay.”

“Fine with me.” He kisses her forehead. “Be ready to fly out first thing in the morning.”

“Feels weird not to have Bolt cracking the whip,” she says.

“Even Bolt gets a break every once in a while.” Maverick flashes me a conspiratorial grin. “You think he and Skipper are enjoying the Amalfi Coast?”

“They better be,” I pretend to grumble. “They’re finally official and for the sake of my business, I need them to stay that way. That girl can’t keep a thought in her head when they’re fighting.”

“Well, I’m happy for them,” Tamia offers, her features settling into softness. “You guys sure you don’t want to come with me to Ghana?”

“I wish,” I say. “But Sol and I have the Atlanta red carpet tomorrow and then New York for the official premiere. And Chapel needs me in LA.”

“I’m shocked Dad is letting me go check this new property on my own.” Tamia grins at her father as if testing the truth of her words.

“If I didn’t need to be with Hendrix,” Maverick says, “I would be on the first flight to Ghana. I’ll come next week to make sure everything’s in order.”

“You really don’t have to.” The exasperation on Tamia’s face is tinged with affection. “I’ve got this, Dad. I had a great teacher.”

“I know.” Maverick gently pulls her neck into the crook of his elbow until her head rests against his chest. “But what kind of teacher doesn’t check on his student? Besides, it’ll make your Mom

feel better about you deferring college."

"It'll make *you* feel better about her deferring college," I correct, aiming a knowing look at him.

"Exactly!" Tamia high-fives me.

"Did I hear the words 'deferring college'?" Soledad winces as she and Yasmen walk up beside us. "Because I fear that's a discussion Lupe will want to have soon."

"I'm here for you," Tamia says. "And congrats on the new show. Great first episode. Who knew baking soda was good for all that?"

"Sol knew," Yasmen says. "And you may have to have that talk with Deja, too."

"Deja gon' be out-earning all y'all." I chuckle at the long-suffering look on both my friends' faces. "You shouldn't have raised such amazing girls if you didn't want to deal with them being… well… amazing."

"I think you have to take some of the responsibility for that." Yasmen links her elbows with mine and Soledad's. "Since they get a lot of that inspiration from their Aunt Hen."

"Oh, for sure, Aunt Hen has to take some of the blame for our girls being badasses," Soledad says, leaning over to kiss my cheek. "And at least a little bit for me being a badass."

For some reason, them saying that—that I had even the smallest part in helping to influence their daughters, some of the most confident, compassionate and smart young women I know—prickles tears behind my eyes. People often hold the uncertain future at the end of our lives over the heads of women who don't want children.

Who'll take care of you when you're old? Aren't you afraid of dying alone?

Do I go through 95 percent of my life living with a decision I regret so the last 5 percent of my life I'm guaranteed a caretaker?

I've poured my love and care into a circle of people who surround me now and will encircle me then. I've watched my mother survive nearly everyone she loved throughout her life until now there are so few left. When I couldn't be there, her sister was. Her church was. Her neighbors were because she'd extended herself all her life, not just to me, her child, but to everyone around her, and they wanted to extend themselves to her.

That's community.

Yes, there is power in making your own way and joy in sharing it. Sharing it with your family. Sharing it with your friends.

And—if you find the blessing of it—with the love of your life.

"You ready?" Maverick asks, shoving his hands into his pockets and eyeing the large gate that guards the Sky Park entrance.

"Yeah." I kiss Soledad's and Yasmen's cheeks. "Great job organizing everything tonight, Yas. And, Sol, you supernova. That first episode is fantastic. Tomorrow, the red carpet!"

We squeal and squeeze and laugh. All the while, Maverick is tugging me away and toward the park's exit by inches.

"Ready to go, were you?" I laugh once we settle into the back seat of the car.

"I'm sorry." He loops our fingers together. "I thought you'd want to check on your mother before it gets too late considering we have to leave so early in the morning."

"No, you're right. I just had to tear myself away because it was such a great night."

He pulls the car into the drive of the contemporary house in the heart of Skyland I bought for Mama, Aunt Geneva, She-she, and me. It's more space than we need, but I love the extra room so we aren't always on top of each other. There are also enough bedrooms that the nurse who comes in a few times a week has her own.

"Where's She-she?" Maverick asks, glancing around the empty foyer.

"Probably upstairs asleep at the foot of my bed. Prissy self."

He chuckles and slips his arms around my waist. "I don't mind having you to myself for a few minutes without her yapping at our heels and demanding all your attention."

"Jealous?" I whisper, linking my arms behind his neck.

"Always." He bends and drops a kiss on my lips. "Let's go out back."

He walks us to the kitchen and toward the door leading to Mama's garden.

"You want to go out here?" I frown, but don't stop his progress. "At midnight?"

"I want to see how all our hard work in the garden is paying off."

He slants a grin over one shoulder, and I melt. Not just under the heat of his smile, but from the warmth of memory. Him out back helping my mother plant her "prize" ranunculus in the backyard where I grew up and then again here when Mama moved to Skyland. The transition hasn't been perfect or without its

setbacks, but Mama has adjusted surprisingly well. I know this garden Maverick helped her plant gets some of the credit for that.

I may have questioned the rationale of coming out here this late, but I can't deny this place's serenity. In the blossoms that are a legacy of my grandmother, whose flowers won my mother's heart. Of the star-studded sky and the gentle breeze whispering through the trees surrounding the garden. All the tension of the night, the excitement and anticipation, dissolves.

We sit on the bench that Maverick had delivered the day we moved into the house. It bears my parents' initials. A testament to their love. Some days I look through the back window and see Mama lost in her own thoughts; in the labyrinth of her own mind, just tracing their initials with her fingers.

Only now I've come to realize that maybe she's not lost out here, but this is where she feels most found.

"I know it sounds crazy," I say, my voice cracking the smallest bit. "Because we didn't live in this house, didn't grow up in Atlanta, but sometimes when I sit on this bench, I can feel him. Daddy, I mean."

"Doesn't sound crazy to me. I never met him, but I imagine that he's here surrounded by ranunculus and this bench memorializing their love."

I lay my head on his shoulder. "That's sweet, Mav."

"Matter of fact, the last time I was out here," Maverick goes on, "I had a talk with him."

I lift my head to peer at him in the shadows of the garden.

"Are you serious?" I ask, laughing a little.

"Yeah." He nods in that decisive way he has that dares you to question even his most outrageous investment, his riskiest move. "For a while actually."

"What'd you… Well, what'd you say?"

"I said I was sorry we never got the chance to meet." Maverick clears his throat, his voice sounding tight with something close to uncharacteristic nervousness. "I thanked him for making someone so perfect for me. For raising you to be authentic and confident and kind."

I swallow the heat gathering in my throat.

"I told him that I love you." Maverick's voice barely lifts above a whisper now. I have to lean in, to strain a little to catch the heartfelt words. "I promised him I'd be good to you. That I would

take care of you and of your mother."

A hot tear slides down my cheek at that. I don't even bother to wipe it away. Maverick never complains when I have to cancel plans at the last minute because Mama's having a bad day. He's not freaked out when she melts down or loses the thread of this world and spirals into another. Fate or God or the universe—whatever formed us to fit—knew what, *who*, I needed.

"I told him that one day, I'd ask you, with his blessing, to be mine forever," Maverick says, steadily running his thumb over the back of my hand like he didn't just say something that caused an axial tilt. Everything goes still, and it feels like my blood stops flowing, my breath gets hung up in my chest and even the night around us suspends, awaiting his next words.

"And he couldn't answer, of course," Maverick says, studying the tangle of our fingers resting on his thigh. "But I felt like he was pleased. I felt like I had his blessing. And, of course, I asked your mother for hers. She said yes."

He meets my eyes, searches my face. "So I guess that only leaves you."

He slides off the bench and onto one knee. I don't speak or even breathe, but sit as prone as the stone statues peppered throughout Mama's garden. Awe and shock twisting through a storm of joy. I hazard a glance at him, and his eyes are so hot and tender in a face more sober than I've maybe ever seen it.

"I want a life with you, Gorgeous. I want to spoil you if you'll let me." He chuckles and shrugs. "I know you'll let me because you deserve it."

I still can't speak, but manage a small breath of a laugh while I wait to see where he goes, what he says next.

"I want my love to be the most extravagant gift I ever give you," he whispers, his voice deep and reverent. "I want it to be outrageously unconditional. I want it to overflow and spill into every crevice of your life, every corner of your heart because that's what you do for me. You overwhelm me, Hendrix."

Even seeing him on bended knee, hearing the love and devotion pouring from him, I was not prepared to hear those words. Logically, I knew where this was going, but my heart pounds and skips and hammers with the shocking reality of this amazing man asking me to spend the rest of our lives together.

"I didn't see this coming," Maverick continues, his eyes sure,

but his voice shaking slightly, so far from the confident cadence I'm used to. "Things were complicated and awkward at first. Looking at how we met and how things started, of course they were, but there's never been anything awkward about you for me. I've always felt, almost from the beginning, that I knew you. That I saw you and you saw me. That life up until the day we met had uniquely prepared my heart for yours."

Tears slip over my cheeks unchecked and I taste salt at the corners of my mouth. I haven't spoken a word, but every cell in my body is *screaming*. Every molecule alive and aloud; a rush of blood in my ears and the pelting thrum of my pulse. Erratic. Arrhythmic. And still I can't make my voice come out. I stare at him, mute with wonder. Me—the loud one. The one who's always got something to say—speechless with the possibility of this lifelong joy.

"There are some hard times ahead," he goes on, undaunted by my silence. "Hard times I've lived through before, dark days I've negotiated with my own family. I'm ready to walk this path with you. I will face anything with you. I want to be by your side, and I'd be honored to have you at mine."

A sob catches in my throat, and I cover my mouth with my hand. My eyes close for a second because the commitment, the unwavering devotion in his gaze, undoes me. I scrabble to find my composure, but it's useless. Every defense is gone. Every wall has fallen for this man. I'm bare on this bench before him. Completely vulnerable, but with him, wholly protected and safe.

In a moment like this, I expected to feel elation, of course. The love and the passion and the joy of a proposal. All those things, yes. But this *peace* that washes over me? It's unexpected. Knowing I won't face the dark days alone? That this man, this remarkable man, who loves me so outrageously, will walk with me through storms? Will shelter me when life leaves me vulnerable and exposed? That gives me peace. Seated on a bench that bears my parents' initials, surrounded by the flowers that symbolize their lifelong love, I'm reminded that I wasn't sure I could ever have that. That I'd ever find a man I could trust with my heart, with my goals and dreams; whom I could respect with the assurance that he respects me in return. Maybe I'd subconsciously resigned myself to a life alone, or if I found someone, to a shadow of the love I've seen in those closest to me, but this isn't a shadow of anything. This is blinding light. This is the heat and passion of a thousand suns.

God, this is love.

So when that man I hadn't dared to dream of reaches up to cup my face, looks into my tearful gaze and says…

"Marry me, Hendrix."

There is no hesitation. No reservation. The answer booms loud in my heart. It comes soft in the hand I lay over his. It comes sure when I nod my head, my reply a mere whisper in Mama's garden.

"Yes."

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READING GROUP GUIDE

A NOTE FROM KENNEDY RYAN

When I started writing *Can't Get Enough*, the legal battle over affirmative action was dominating the headlines. I was particularly interested since my alma mater, UNC-Chapel Hill, was one of the defendants in the Supreme Court case challenging race considerations in college admissions. More than once during my tenure at UNC-CH, I'd met assumptions that I was there "on quota" or had somehow taken the place of a qualified white student because of affirmative action. I often discovered that I was as qualified, if not more so, than others, as were so many of my fellow Black students. I'm struck by the irony of people assuming we are not qualified to be in certain spaces when we often are more prepared and outperform expectations because we know we *have* to if we want even a fraction of the opportunities some may take for granted. It should be noted that so-called legacy policies affording the children of alumni admissions advantages were not addressed in the *SFFA v. University of North Carolina* case, but only those perceived advantages for marginalized students.

Soon after this landmark decision, Edward Blum, the conservative legal activist who helmed the affirmative action case,

filed a suit against the Fearless Fund, an Atlanta-based venture capital entity dedicated to helping women of color start businesses. His law firm alleged Fearless Fund was in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which at its heart was intended to provide legal protection for Black people subject to widespread discrimination following emancipation. This law is now being used against the very people it was designed to protect, undercutting our gains and seeking to make moving forward that much harder.

I knew this was the kind of fight Hendrix would gladly take on. She is the kind of woman—smart, principled, confident, generous—who would dedicate energy to helping those already trying to help themselves realize their dreams. Black Americans are not asking for things we have not earned. We are expecting a stake in something we helped build. Centuries of systemic inequities have tilted the playing field in such a way that without intention, marginalized people here in the US—Black people here—often don't experience true equality without legal and social interventions seeking to close the gaps created by years of injustice.

Some may wonder why I would approach a topic like this in a romance novel.

Why wouldn't I?

No one wonders about weightier issues being broached in literary fiction or crime novels or any other genre. Why must romance remain agnostic on the most urgent issues of the day? Nina Simone said, "An artist's duty is to reflect the times." James Baldwin spoke of writers as disruptors. I write about universal themes of humanity—love, joy, passion, hurt, healing, forgiveness—but my characters exist in specificity. They have particular identities and experiences that give them opinions and convictions. The things they wrestle with and fight for are as much a part of their humanity as the people they love and the things they celebrate. That is true of Hendrix and her commitment to female founders getting a larger share of venture capital funding than the fraction they now receive.

The Fearless Fund ultimately shut down its grant program because it didn't want what happened with affirmative action to happen in their case—that they would be used as precedent to gut the efforts of other firms striving for equity in the venture capital space. Oh, don't worry. They are still helping in other remarkable ways. They are warriors and women I admire deeply.

You'll notice I didn't resolve Hendrix's case. She gets her happily ever after, as all my heroines do, but we—women, Black women, any marginalized person—even in wedded bliss still have battles to fight. In my books, though, they are guaranteed amazing partners at their sides who respect, love, and cherish them even as they press on and forward. My stories are here to entertain, but they are also here to engage, to provoke and encourage. We are having a conversation, you and I, when you read my books. Thank you for listening.

PLAYLIST

Scan here for the *Can't Get Enough* playlist!
https://kennedyryanwrites.com/playlist-cant-get-enough

RECIPES

Brownie Batter Dip Recipe

Ingredients

1 cup (8 oz.) cream cheese, softened
¼ cup unsalted butter, softened
2 cups powdered sugar
⅓ cup cocoa powder (unsweetened)
¼ cup brown sugar, packed
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
¼ teaspoon salt
¼ cup heavy cream (or milk, for a lighter dip)
½ cup mini chocolate chips (optional, for added texture), additional for garnish

Instructions

Mix Cream Cheese and Butter: In a large mixing bowl, beat the softened cream cheese and butter together until smooth and creamy using a hand mixer.

Add Sugars and Cocoa: Add the powdered sugar, cocoa powder, brown sugar, vanilla extract, and salt. Mix until well combined.

Add Cream: Gradually add the heavy cream (or milk) and mix until the dip reaches a smooth, creamy consistency.

Fold in Chocolate Chips: If you like, gently fold in the mini chocolate chips for a bit of crunch.

Chill (Optional): You can serve it immediately, but for best results, let the dip chill in the refrigerator for about 30 minutes before serving.

Serve with graham crackers, pretzels, fresh fruit (like

strawberries or apple slices), or vanilla wafers.

Hash Brown Casserole Recipe

Ingredients

1 (30 oz.) bag frozen shredded hash browns, thawed
½ cup unsalted butter, melted
1 (10.5 oz.) can condensed cream of chicken soup
1½ cups sour cream
2 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
½ cup chopped onion (optional)
1 teaspoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon onion powder
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper

Instructions

Preheat Oven: Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease a 9x13-inch baking dish.

Mix Ingredients: In a large bowl, combine the thawed hash browns, melted butter, cream of chicken soup, sour cream, shredded cheese, chopped onion (if using), garlic powder, onion powder, salt, and pepper. Mix until well combined.

Assemble Casserole: Transfer the mixture to the prepared baking dish, spreading it out evenly.

Bake: Bake for 45–50 minutes, or until the top is golden brown and the casserole is bubbly.

Serve: Let it cool for a few minutes before serving!

Sweet Potato Pecan Pie Recipe

Ingredients

For the Crust:

1 unbaked 9-inch piecrust (store-bought or homemade)

For the Sweet Potato Filling:

2 medium sweet potatoes (about 1½ cups mashed)
½ cup granulated sugar
¼ cup brown sugar, packed
¼ cup unsalted butter, melted
2 large eggs
½ cup heavy cream
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon ground nutmeg
¼ teaspoon ground ginger
¼ teaspoon salt

For the Pecan Topping:

1 cup pecan halves
½ cup light corn syrup
¼ cup brown sugar, packed
¼ cup unsalted butter, melted
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
2 large eggs, lightly beaten
Pinch of salt

Instructions

Prepare the Sweet Potatoes: Preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C). Pierce the sweet potatoes with a fork and bake for 45–60 minutes or until soft. Alternatively, you can microwave them until tender. Let them cool, then peel and mash until smooth.

Make the Sweet Potato Filling: In a large bowl, mix the mashed sweet potatoes, granulated sugar, brown sugar, melted butter, eggs, heavy cream, vanilla, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and

salt. Whisk until smooth and creamy. Pour the sweet potato filling into the unbaked piecrust and spread it evenly.

Make the Pecan Topping: In a separate bowl, combine the corn syrup, brown sugar, melted butter, vanilla, eggs, and salt. Whisk until well combined. Stir in the pecan halves.

Assemble the Pie: Carefully spoon the pecan mixture over the sweet potato filling. Spread it out evenly so the pecans cover the top.

Bake the Pie: Place the pie on a baking sheet (to catch any drips) and bake at 350°F (175°C) for 45–55 minutes, or until the center is set and the pecan topping is golden brown. If the crust starts to brown too quickly, cover the edges with foil.

Cool and Serve: Allow the pie to cool completely on a wire rack before slicing. The filling will set as it cools. Serve with whipped cream or a scoop of vanilla ice cream for an extra treat!

***Tip: Make-Ahead**: This pie can be made a day ahead and stored in the refrigerator. Just bring it to room temperature before serving.*

White Cadillac Cocktail

Ingredients

1½ oz. premium tequila (reposado preferred)
1 oz. white crème de cacao
1 oz. Irish cream liqueur
1 oz. heavy cream (or half-and-half)
Ice cubes

For the Gold Sugar Rim:

Gold rimming sugar
Honey or simple syrup (to help the sugar adhere)

Optional Garnish:

Freshly grated nutmeg, finely shaved chocolate, or a sprinkle of cocoa powder

Instructions

Prepare the Glass: Pour a small amount of honey or simple syrup onto a shallow plate. On a separate plate, spread the gold rimming sugar. Dip the rim of a chilled martini or coupe glass into the honey/syrup, then dip it into the gold sugar. Rotate the glass to ensure an even coating. Place the glass in the freezer for 5 minutes to set the sugar.

Mix the Cocktail: In a cocktail shaker, combine the tequila, white crème de cacao, Irish cream, and heavy cream. Add ice and shake vigorously for 20–30 seconds until well chilled and frothy.

Serve: Strain the cocktail into the prepared glass with the gold sugar rim. Add a light dusting of freshly grated nutmeg, fine chocolate shavings, or cocoa powder for an extra touch of elegance.

Aunt Evelyn's Chowchow

Ingredients

3 lbs. shredded cabbage (about 8 cups)
3 lbs. green heirloom tomatoes, chopped
3 large green peppers, chopped
2 large red bell peppers, chopped
2 large white onions, chopped
4 cups water
½ cup pickling salt
1½ cups sugar
1½ qts. white vinegar
Aunt Evelyn says for a kick, she adds jalapeños, or for the really spicy at heart—habaneros—TO TASTE!

Instructions

Salt your vegetables: Put cabbage, tomatoes, onions, and peppers in a bowl with 4 cups of water. Season with salt and toss. Cover and let the mixture stand for 7–8 hours.

Drain the veggies. Rinse and drain again before setting it aside.

Prepare your brine: Combine sugar and vinegar in a large pot. Cover and bring it to boil.

Add your veggies: Combine veggies with brine mixture. Let simmer for about 8–10 minutes. Colors will change to indicate it's done.

Ready! Set! Store!: While hot, spoon the chowchow into hot, clean jars (use boiling bath for jars). Leave about half an inch at the top. Make sure there are no air bubbles. Put lids on jars and seal. You should hear a pop to know it's sealed properly. Screw on bands. Process sealed jars in boiling water canner for 10 minutes. Turn off heat. Let jars cool and remove from the canner. Let jars stand and cool for 12 hours. When properly sealed, you can press the lid's center, and it won't flex. Label with date. You can store in pantry for up to 18 months.

Serve to enhance many dishes—meat, vegetables, hot dogs, hamburgers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I was writing this book, I lost one of my dearest bookish friends. Natasha (formerly @talesfromthetashside) was an avid reader, an aspiring writer, and an incredible human being. The embodiment of joy, she was working on her debut novel when she passed away. She wanted her words to go around the world. The last time she reviewed a book of mine was This Could Be Us*, the second book in the Skyland series. It's a review, but it's also a beautiful encouragement to women everywhere to put themselves first.*

Tasha, look at your words go.

We all miss you so much, sweet friend!

This one's for the girls.

Who are fighting through fire, foraging for their ferocity for the first time.

For the girls rediscovering their strength that they have buried under servitude.

This one's for the girls…

Who have been pushed down, beat down, or put down, because they didn't want you to discover how strong you truly are.

This one's for the girls…

Whose lives are dedicated to those they love, with joy, without reciprocal respect or recognition.

This one's for the girls…

Who extend grace and compassion to everyone else, making allowances for others' behavior, but are quick to find fault with and disparage yourselves.

This one's for the girls…

Who were told you were too much or too little, too boisterous or too broken, and walk around minimizing or masking who you are to ensure acceptance.

This one's for the girls…

Who need a reminder of what a masterpiece looks like… a reminder that you can look internally and in the mirror and discover your true potential and your divinely crafted beauty, and fall in love with the most important person in your life—YOU.

This one's for the girls…

Who don't need a partner to complete their lives or justify their worth, but whose powerful presence and radiance attract the kind of love that they deserve.

This one's for the girls…

Whose hearts cried out for understanding, for compassion, and received this—a symbol of solidarity, a love letter—to celebrate both who we are and who we could be.

Special thanks also to Tracey S. for answering all my questions about venture capital. And to Joanna and Keisha for always reading my awful first draft and assuming the arduous task of helping to make it better. ♡

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author **Kennedy Ryan** writes for women from all walks of life, empowering them and placing them firmly at the center of each story and in charge of their own destinies. An EBONY Power 100 Honoree, Kennedy and her writings have been featured in NPR, *Entertainment Weekly, USA Today, Glamour, Cosmo, TIME*, and many others. Kennedy is an executive producer for her Skyland series, which is currently in development for television at Peacock. The cofounder of LiFt 4 Autism, an annual charitable book auction, Kennedy has a passion for raising Autism awareness. Dubbed the Queen of Hugs by her readers, she is the wife to her lifetime lover and mother to an extraordinary son.

Find out more, at:

KennedyRyanWrites.com
Facebook.com/KennedyRyanAuthor
Blue Sky: kennedyryan.bsky.social
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